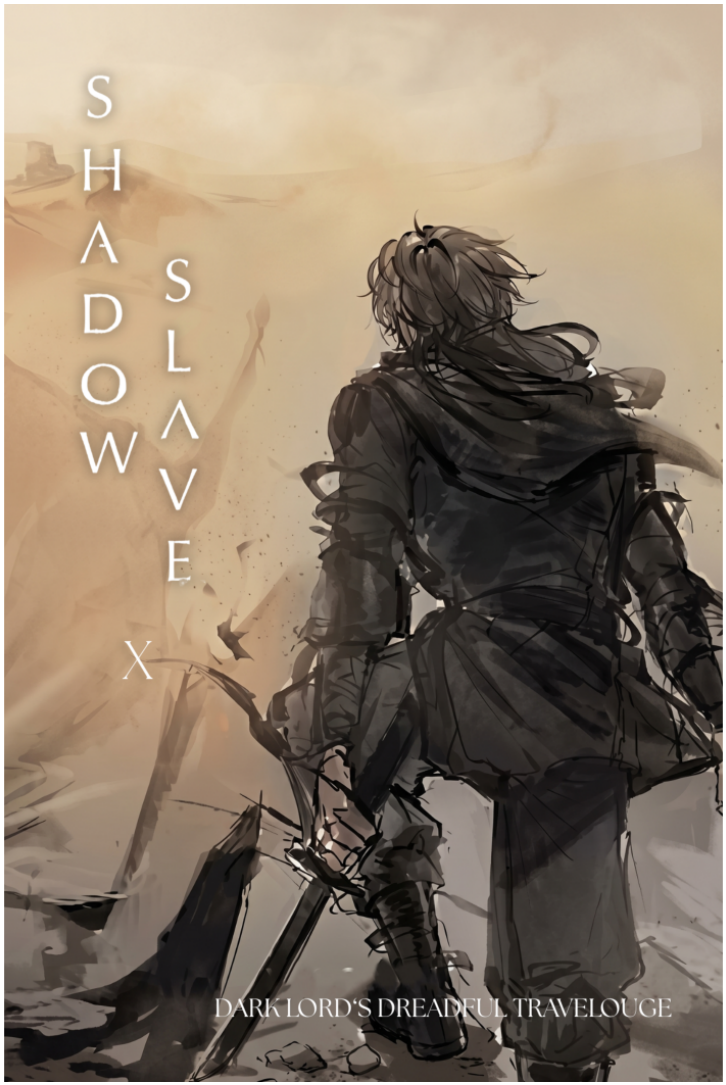
SHADOW SLAVE
X
DARK LORD'S DREADFUL TRAVELOUGE

Information

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Summary

Growing up in poverty, Sunny never expected anything good from life. However, even he did not anticipate being chosen by the Nightmare Spell and becoming one of the Awakened

– an elite group of people gifted with supernatural powers.

Transported into a ruined magical world, he found himself facing against terrible monsters

– and other Awakened

– in a deadly battle of survival.

What's worse, the divine power he received happened to possess a small, but potentially fatal side effect…

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Shadow Slave

Volume-10

Dark Lord's Dreadful Travelogue

Chapter-2262: Foundation

Sunny stared at the grinning skull for a while, then shook his head.

"You know, Eurys, I'd thought you would have learned the true meaning of boredom while hanging on that tree. Can't you just appreciate me sparing time to entertain you? These are history-defining events that I am describing! The stuff of legends! When else would you get the chance to hear something as thrilling and fascinating as this?"

The ancient skeleton stared back at him for a while, then clicked his jaw.

"Well… true."

He turned his skull slightly and asked in a lively tone:

"So, what happened next?"

A satisfied smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

'That's better!'

"Let's see… it is hard to describe, actually. Needless to say, the entire world order was upended, and a new one had to emerge from the ruins of the old regime. Fortunately, we weren't unprepared. Jet had the government under her control, more or less, and since there was no reason for anyone there to oppose Nephis — quite the opposite, actually — we had a vast pool of administrative talent to help us make the transition happen as smoothly as possible. In fact, there had already been established plans worked out, disguised as mock exercises until it was time to implement them."

He shook his head.

"The government was only half of the equation, though. The other half was the Great Clans — Song, Valor, and Night. They had been the ones actually governing human enclaves in the Dream Realm, after all. We had hoped that these established powers would be absorbed into the new Domain after the war ended, and to a degree, they were."

Sunny sighed.

"The Seven Princesses of Song accepted Nephis as their new Queen despite the fact that she had slain their mother — that was a great stroke of luck. With them on our side, the western reaches of the Dream Realm experienced very little tumult during the transition. Ravenheart itself is now ruled by Kai… I think his official title is the Steward of the West."

His expression darkened slightly.

"The east… things are more complicated in the east. Morgan had helped us salvage the remains of Valor at the start, but then she disappeared without a trace. Even Cassie doesn't know where she is now. And most of the remaining members of the branch families of Valor — those who had not perished in the war — died gruesomely soon after. It's not a big secret who killed them, of course. Mordret, that madman…"

Sunny let out a chuckle.

"That guy had always been strange, but he became outright eerie after failing to kill Anvil with his own two hands. No one knows what goes on in that sinister head of his these days. One thing is certain, though — he knows to hide from the new Supremes. Retaking the Stormsea Citadels he had conquered was a time-consuming, but surprisingly easy affair as a result. Mordret simply abandoned them and vanished. So, both children of the fallen Valor dynasty are missing now. It is unlikely that they jumped into the Fourth Nightmare, but... who knows?"

He remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"Well, in any case. A Great Clan is far more than just those who carry

the clan bloodline. There are also the Knights, the Spellsmiths, the servants, the craftsmen, the workers, the administrative staff — thousands of people, really. Those were either absorbed into the Immortal Flame clan or taken by Effie. Oh, Effie is now in charge of Bastion as the Steward of the East. The Beast Farm is back in business, too…"

Sunny smiled wistfully.

"That leaves the House of Night. House of Night… doesn't exist anymore. The survivors were absorbed by the government, so the government is more or less the third Great Clan now. They are responsible for the waking world just like before, but now their role in the Dream Realm is far more prominent. Oh, and they rule the Stormsea, as well. Jet is in control of the Night Garden as the Steward of the South."

He chuckled.

"Funny, isn't it? A woman who can never know rest is in charge of the ship built by the Demon of Repose. Well, she has her hands full… I think she is more sleep-deprived now than she had been as a government Master. There are millions of settlers living aboard the Night Garden, after all. The House of Night had not had a Sovereign, but now it belongs to Neph's Domain. So, she can open a Dream Gate, leading to it from the waking world, allowing the refugees to arrive. Actually, the importance of the Night Garden is far greater than simply the third largest city in the Dream Realm."

He looked at Eurys with meaning.

"One of its Components allows Nephis to connect her Dream Gate to two places in the Dream Realm, after all. So, the East and the West are not as isolated as they were before. There's the Stormsea connecting them in the south, the road across Godgrave connecting them in the north, and on top of that, Ravenheart and Bastion are a few steps away when the Dream Gate is opened between them. Works wonders for the logistics of the whole Domain."

Sunny fell silent for a few moments, then continued in a neutral tone:

"Actually, that is the most glaring change that has happened to the world. It is all far more interconnected now. Both geographically and politically. Everyone had been mostly isolated from each other before, but now, everyone is a part of one larger whole. Everyone is... together. The various regions of the Dream Realm are not independent enclaves, but territories of a single empire. Socially, too… the difference between mundane people, independent Awakened, Legacy Clans, and the Great Clans have all grown thinner. And above it all is the Ivory Tower… quite literally. It usually hangs above Bastion."

He chuckled.

"Oh, right. No one really knows it, but there's actually a Steward of the North, as well. That's me. I mean, no one appointed me officially, but I'm the only one in the north, so… I can't be the only one without a fancy title, right?"

Eurys stared at him for a while, then clicked his jaw.

"I have no idea what these places are and who these people are, you know? A single man was sent to take care of seven princesses in the west — what a cruel punishment! — someone farms beasts in the east, and there are gardens in the southern sea. Sounds fun!"

Sunny sighed.

"You have no idea…"

Chapter-2263: Beginning of the End

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said somberly:

"Of course, not everyone went smoothly. Far from it, really. Nephis had managed to compel countless people, and most of the Saints, to swear fealty to her. However, there were still loyalists who refused to accept her. Some were even hellbent on avenging the fallen Sovereigns. So… there was a quiet purge, of sorts."

He sighed.

"It was not as bloody as you probably imagined. Very few people were actually killed, but quite a number of them were exiled. Nephis rules both the waking world and the human territories in the Dream Realm, though, so it's not like they had somewhere to go. So, we allocated them a settlement in Europe and a Citadel in Godgrave. Old Jest is in charge of it now, spending his retirement leading those men in a perpetual battle against the scarlet jungle. Gilead, that buffoon, chose exile as well. What a waste."

Sunny shook his head, a grim expression on his face.

He did not speak for a while, then scoffed.

"Well, those guys are the least of our problems. Truth be told, everything sort of exploded after Nephis took over."

His lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"That is because her style of leadership is more or less the direct opposite of how the Sovereigns used to run things. One of the first things she did after establishing her Domain was give a very solemn, very inspiring speech... that revealed to everyone how our world is

being consumed by the Dream Realm. You can imagine what kind of chaos ensued after that broadcast.

Sunny chuckled.

"We are still dealing with the consequences. It had to be done, though. Since we are not planning on leaving most of humanity behind, the great exodus must be accelerated. And we need for everyone to work together in order to make it happen, both in the waking world and in the Dream Realm."

His expression fell.

"There are countless problems facing us, of course. For example… the entire Eastern Quadrant is infected by the Skinwalker now. A few cities are already lost, and worst of all, it is very hard for me or Nephis to return to the waking world for extended periods of time. Feels quite weird, by the way, to be rejected by your own world… in any case, there is a full-scale war against that damn abomination going on in Australia, and most of our best Saints are holding the creature back."

He sighed.

"Meanwhile, the number of the Nightmare Gates opening each month only continues to grow. We had to abandon the initial plan of gradually resettling people from across the globe and concentrate on bringing away the population of the Eastern Quadrant first. If everything goes well, the Western Quadrant will be next. And finally, the Northern Quadrant will be last. That will take years, though, if not decades… because resettling the entire population of a world is not as easy as ushering them through the Dream Gate."

Sunny grimaced.

"They also need shelter, food, and means to survive on the other side. So, we need to prepare the Dream Realm to accept them first. That is not an easy task… you see, although we call large swathes of that dreadful world 'human territories', in truth, most of these territories are still abomination-infested wilderness. Only the Citadels and the immediate areas around them are truly safe. And while that is

enough for a small number of Awakened to get by, there is no space for cities, arable fields, and so on… the situation started to change in the aftermath of the Chain of Nightmares, but it is not changing fast enough."

Glancing at Eurys, Sunny added with a smile:

"Which is why a subjugation crusade unlike anything that has ever happened is now in process. All across the Dream Realm, countless Awakened are cleansing the lands from Nightmare Creatures and preparing them to welcome settlers. Despite how bloody and arduous that process is, the morale is surprisingly high… well, maybe it is not that big of a surprise. The very nature of warfare in the Dream Realm has changed, after all."

His smile turned a little wistful.

"That is because humans have a living goddess now. Well… a demigoddess, to be precise, but most don't know the difference. And Nephis actually answers prayers, unlike the dead gods. What I mean to say is that she can feel the distress of her subjects and bestow her blessing upon them from a distance. So, they can be saved from the jaws of death by her flames, as well as be empowered by her radiance. It's no joke, Eurys… I'd say that the overall combat effectiveness of humanity has increased manifold due to Nephis and her Domain. Just like that. Can you imagine a difference between an army that has to be cautious of each wound and an army that is not only empowered by divine grace, but also practically immortal?"

Sunny shook his head.

"...She still has her limits, though. So we are still struggling, and there are still many casualties. The progress is stunningly fast… but it is also not fast enough."

He remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"You might wonder what the second Supreme is doing while Changing Star toils night and day for the sake of humanity. What I am doing. Well… I am quite busy, as well. It is just that while Nephis is in charge of governing the great exodus from the waking world, I

am preoccupied with preparing for what comes after."

His voice turned somber.

"Because what comes after is more terrifying than words can express. All the work we are doing can be rendered meaningless if we can't stop the calamity that will start once the Dream Realm swallows the waking world and shifts."

Sunny looked at Eurys, lingered for a few moments, and then chuckled.

"Well, I am also doing quite a few things here and there. Like entertaining an obnoxious skeleton. Actually…"

He looked into the distance and shook his head with an amused expression on his face.

"You won't believe it, Eurys, but I found myself in charge of a Legacy Clan of my own."

Chapter-2264: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Eurys went so far as to nod.

"I don't know what a Legacy Clan is, but congratulations!"

Sunny smiled.

"Ah. Well, you see… when I was growing up, I was at the very bottom, and Legacy scions were at the pinnacle. But now I am the pinnacle. You were a slave, no? Imagine becoming a prince all of a sudden. That is how it feels."

Eurys suddenly let out a creaky laugh.

"Oh… actually, I used to be a prince before becoming a slave. So I would not know."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then looked at him with curiosity.

"You used to be a prince?"

The skull stared back at him, grinning.

"Did I say 'prince'? I meant priest. Or did I? My, oh my! Who can tell… my memories are all scattered, oh no…"

Sunny scoffed, then turned away.

"Well, in any case. The Legacy Clans as a whole are not what they used to be, these days. Too many new Awakened emerged in the wake of the Chain of Nightmares, so the prestige of the old families has lost some relevance. Even the Great Clans, the symbol of the Legacy power, are overshadowed by the Immortal Flame clan now — which is so above everything else that it exists in a realm of its own."

He remained silent for a moment.

"Nephis is the only living heir of the Immortal Flame bloodline. Of course, she has her Fire Keepers — in fact, the Fire Keepers are the most brilliant military force of humanity now. The tip of the spear. The original members of the Dreamer Army are still the core, but each is leading a hundred elite Awakened warriors now, the best of the best."

He suddenly laughed.

"Actually, they recruited this fresh blood through a huge tournament. Hundreds of thousands of Awakened participated, but only around four thousand were accepted into the ranks of the Fire Keepers. It was a very festive week — both worlds were watching with bated breaths. A perfectly timed distraction and reprieve for the masses, as well. It will probably be held every few years from now on, I think. I had fun too, by the way. Turns out, tournaments make me feel nostalgic…"

Sunny looked into the distance for a while, reminiscing.

"I once won a tournament myself, you know? Regardless, the Fire Keepers are everywhere, under the spotlight, serving as the valiant heralds of the new Domain. But there are certain tasks that they can't perform — tasks that require a delicate approach, or have to be accomplished without anyone being the wiser. That is where the Shadow Clan comes in. My clan."

He scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

"For reasons that I won't explain, I found myself in dire need of anonymity. That doesn't mean that I have to go live somewhere in solitude for the rest of my life, though, just that my exposure to the world must be… limited. So, Shadow Clan is far smaller in scale than the Fire Keepers. There are barely two hundred people, and only half of those are combatants."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Each and every one of those combatants is an exceptional killer,

though. I chose them myself. Most know a thing or two about stealth, too… oh, and since they bear my mark, they have certain advantages when operating in the shadows. Overall, they've been very effective in dealing with various problems we faced — like terrorist cells created by the unhinged loyalists, doomsday cults that started popping up after Neph's speech, Nightmare Creatures that required a special approach to be surgically removed, and so on."

Glancing at Eurys, he hesitated for a few moments, and then grinned.

"The Shadow Clan does not officially exist, naturally. There are scary tales about my minions… I mean, about my brave subordinates... being told around campfires, but most people know nothing."

He sighed.

"The Shadow Clan resides on the Forgotten Shore. That is where it all started, so returning there as a ruler, instead of a prisoner, feels strangely emotional. Of course, I did not choose it simply out of sentiment… it is an important strategic location for many reasons."

Sunny raised a hand and started counting on his fingers.

"First of all… we don't know where the pieces of the waking world will land after being absorbed into the Dream Realm, so it's important to have a strong presence north of the Hollow Mountains for a variety of reasons. Second, we need a base of operations in case we decide to stage a military expedition into the Nightmare Desert. Third, I need to find an easily accessible entrance to the Underworld. Fourth, I need to make my Domain stronger. The Burned Forest is a perfect place for that. Fifth… I can stay out of sight there."

He grew quiet, and then added somberly:

"And lastly, it is our contingency in case everything else is overrun by the Nightmare Creatures once the waking world is consumed. The last stronghold."

At the same time, two more fingers grew out of his hand. Sunny bent the sixth, stared at the seventh for a while, then dismissed both and sighed.

"We are in quite a predicament, you know? There are the Death Zones in the Dream Realm and the profane beings that dwell there. There is also the waking world itself… which already has at least one Category Five Gate there, and maybe even something worse on the moon. There will be more such Gates in the future — perhaps soon. That means that more Cursed and Unholy abominations will crawl into our world before it is consumed. Creatures like that are suppressed by the laws of the War Realm, but once it is swallowed by the Dream Realm, these laws will be no more. So, nothing will stop those horrors from roaming free. Imagine Earth's moon rising above Bastion… it will be total annihilation."

Eurys clicked his jaw.

"My, oh my! It certainly will."

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at him with strange intensity.

Eventually, he said:

"So, this is our deadline. In fact, we don't even know when the pieces of Earth will start popping up all across Dream Realm en masse. So there is no time to waste at all… we must become gods before our world is entirely consumed, Nephis and I. If not that, then at least Sacred."

The ancient skeleton laughed.

"Oh? Oh, that's all? You want to become at least a Spirit, boy?"

Sunny nodded and smiled pleasantly.

"I do. So, how about it? You knew a thing or two about attaining Supremacy, Eurys. Do you know a thing or two about the Apotheosis, as well?"

Eurys laughed again, then said in an incredulous tone:

"I might…"

Chapter-2265: One Man Army

The ancient skeleton remained silent for a while, studying Sunny with his empty eye sockets. Then, he said in an unexpectedly nonchalant tone:

"How is being Supreme treating you?"

Sunny considered his answer for a while, then raised a hand. Soon, a bottle of antique wine appeared in it. Removing the cork with a blade made of shadows, he took a sip and smiled contentedly.

"Well… it's a bit terrifying, to be honest."

The wine was supposed to taste exquisite, considering that he had pilfered it from the wine cellars of the Valor clan, but Sunny honestly couldn't tell the difference from the normal wine he sometimes used for cooking. He was not going to get drunk unless he wanted to, regardless, so drinking this relic of the bygone eras was mostly to amuse himself.

"Before, my power grew exponentially every time I attained a new Rank. But it was still just that, my personal power — no matter how great it was, I was still merely an individual… or a few individuals, at best. But now that I am Supreme, there has been a qualitative change to it. My personal power is like a natural force, and I am not merely a person. I am more of a walking kingdom."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"It is strange even to say out loud, but one of me is enough to conquer the world… or destroy it, should I wish. I grew up in the outskirts of NQSC, you know, surrounded by stories about valiant Awakened, Masters, and Saints — who were so lofty as to seem unreachable, inconceivable, unimaginable. But as I am today, I could overrun NQSC with all its valiant warriors, then the Northern

Quadrant, then all of Earth. It would not even take me much time… and I will only grow stronger as a result."

Eurys chuckled dryly.

"My, oh my! How scary."

Sunny smiled.

"This is to say that the power of a Supreme is not personal. It is… territorial. Conceptual? It is larger than themselves, is what I mean to say. It is a domain. That is why Neph's own power can increase the power of the entire humanity manifold."

He took another sip of wine, then offered it to the ancient skeleton. Seeing no reaction, Sunny shrugged.

"Well, suit yourself. Now, back to being Supreme. There are a few differences. First of all, my Attributes… the authority granted to me as the [Lord of Shadows] has grown. I can even command the shadows of living beings now, albeit only those much weaker than myself and with great difficulty. Shadows are a very loyal sort, after all. The [Onyx Shell] has become [Jade Shell]. So… I guess I am a bonafide jade beauty now…"

Sunny leaned back and exploded with laughter.

Eurys looked at him with reproach.

"That's enough wine for you, boy…"

Sunny grinned.

"The [Flame of Divinity] has grown much more powerful, too. And my Lineage, as well. Obviously, my body and soul have been reforged, becoming even closer to perfection than before. My soul especially has undergone a big change."

He pointed to the bottle of wine.

"I can actually store physical items in my Soul Sea, for one… only inanimate objects, though. I haven't managed to bring a living being

there yet. But that is alright, because there are plenty of… unliving things in my soul already. All the lifeless shadows I've been collecting throughout the years are much livelier now. They walk around, stare at the temple, and rest on the water from time to time. They're not exactly living beings, but it seems like they retain faint traces of their former selves. If I had to describe it… I'd say that they don't possess a sense of self. They have neither will nor spirit."

Sunny hesitated for a while.

"Which brings us to my new Aspect Ability. The Domain Ability… I guess. I call it the [Shadow Legion]. It allows me to open the gates of my soul and unleash all the shadows gathered there into the world. I can also control them, albeit not quite intricately. The shadows fight in my stead, and every enemy killed by them becomes a new soldier in my army. The shadows are also quite deadly, because it is impossible to destroy them. At best, they can be dispelled and sent back to my soul, where they will be restored to form after a while."

He sighed.

"They retain most powers they possessed as living beings, as well, although that is… a bit complicated. Shadows don't really have the Will, for one, and neither do they have Domains. Some shadows also seem to retain more of their former selves than others, so their learned skills and combat techniques are sharper. Oh, and since most of the shadows in my soul used to be Nightmare Creatures, they have lost those powers that were granted to them by Corruption. My legion is still vast and dreadful, though. It's… I guess all I could say is that I would not have wanted to be my enemy."

Sunny smiled.

"Right, I also received a few other abilities, and my old Aspect Abilities have grown stronger. Every shadow of my Shadow Legion can serve as a vessel for my shadow sense, for example. The maximum range of Shadow Step has become even greater than it had been before… actually, I guess it's limitless now. The only limitation there is is how much essence I have. Shadow Manifestation allows me to create far more intricate items, and I can also make them stay manifested permanently — although that will diminish their potency

quite a bit. And since I am a shadow now instead of a human, I can maintain my incarnations indefinitely, although manifesting them as humans still requires some essence."

He chuckled.

"But I have more essence than I can spend now, too! Which is to say, it replenishes faster than I can waste it. The only way for me to empty my reserves of essence is to travel a truly great distance in a single moment or summon truly powerful members of the Shadow Legion for a very long time. Even then, I'll be back to full power in a relatively short amount of time."

Sunny looked at Eurys while sipping his wine.

"Oh… and I can strike directly at the shadows of living beings, too. Quite an insidious power, that one, although not an unfamiliar one. I knew a guy once who could do just that. I was a bit envious of him, back then, but lo and behold. I gained the same power as a bonus while becoming Supreme…"

Sunny turned the bottle and poured some wine out for Shadow Blade Kurt.

He was certainly not missed, but Sunny was going to use his newfound power well.

He smiled.

"So, I'd say that being a Supreme has been treating me quite well."

Chapter-2266: Out of Time

Sunny remained silent for a while, then nodded.

"I think that's it. I might be forgetting something, but overall, that is how being Supreme is different from being a Saint. I'd say, overall… I feel like a demigod. No, actually, I feel like a god. Because my point of reference is being a mundane human, not an actual deity. From the point of view of a mortal man, my power is no different from that of a god. Of course, from the point of view of a god, I'd probably seem like a child."

He looked into the distance.

"But it's… it's different. The way I am. Because of how domineering my Will is, the world feels far more malleable than before. And I also feel them all, at every waking moment… my shadows. My connection to them is subtle, but it is always there. As if tens of thousands of voices are whispering quietly into my ears. I can also sense them all — moving, fighting, killing. It is as if I have tens of thousands of bodies and hundreds of thousands of eyes. It is enough to drive a man mad, to be honest."

Sunny's expression turned somber.

"It is even worse for Nephis, whose Domain includes billions of people. The longing, their desires wash over her like an ocean, and although she rarely speaks about it, I know that she sometimes struggles not to drown in that ocean."

He sighed.

"Sometimes, I wonder… how much we will change as time goes on."

Eurys stared at him for a while, then clicked his jaw.

"Ah, but that is the bane of being a demigod, boy. You are not quite a mortal, but you are not quite a god either. That is the burden all Supreme humans have to bear. Or maybe it is a blessing — because that burden will gradually make you less and less human."

Sunny frowned, then stared at him darkly.

"Less and less human? What do you mean? How is that a blessing?"

The ancient skeleton let out a creaky laugh.

"Well, you asked me about the Apotheosis, didn't you? The step of becoming a Spirit — a Sacred being, so to say. You described how different being Supreme feels from being Transcendent, but, boy… being Sacred is an entirely different state of existence. Apotheosis is the act of becoming a deity… a god. A lesser deity and a minor god, but still something fundamentally different from a mortal. It is as much about your consciousness and your capacity to encompass the vastness of it all as it is about the quality of your soul and your power."

Eurys shook his skull.

"A Supreme is someone who expands their soul to dominate a portion of the world. A Spirit is someone whose soul can encompass the whole world. Needless to say, that is not something a human mind, a human self can withstand. So, that is why becoming less human can be a blessing for a Supreme — because it changes them gradually, slowly turning them into beings capable of attempting Apotheosis. Very few ever succeed in that attempt, of course."

Sunny remained silent for a while, trying to come to terms with what he just heard.

'Becoming less human…'

A shiver ran down his spine.

Sunny cherished his humanity quite a lot. More than that, losing it sounded frightening — because it was an integral part of his being. Losing some of his humanity was no different from losing himself.

And losing himself was no different from death.

It was quite ironic to say, but even despite having killed himself once… Sunny was still afraid of death, just like any human would be.

He couldn't help but remember Anvil and Ki Song, whose inhuman callousness had been the very reason he hated them so much.

But still, still…

It was not like he or Nephis had a choice. They had to become Sacred. They would not be able to survive or save those they cared about otherwise.

He drank his luxurious wine in dead silence for a while, then asked somberly:

"So, how does one go about attempting Apotheosis?"

Eurys stared at him a bit and pretended to let out a sigh.

"I am sorry to say this, boy… but you have absolutely no chance of becoming Sacred."

Sunny was surprised. He looked at the ancient skeleton with raised eyebrows, then frowned.

"Huh? Aren't you underestimating me too much? I thought you'd know by now that I can accomplish quite a lot, as long as I put my mind to it."

Eurys just shook his skull.

"No, no. I will be the first one to admit that you are a startling existence, boy… a singular talent even by the standards of my tumultuous era. I have no doubt that you would have had a good chance of becoming Sacred — or even Divine — in normal circumstances. But that's just the thing. Your circumstances are not exactly normal, are they?"

Sunny's scowl deepened.

"Sure, I guess. But what exactly do you mean?"

Eurys stared at him for a bit, then spoke neutrally:

"Why, I mean time, of course. As I already mentioned, becoming someone capable of attempting Apotheosis is a slow and gradual process. There is no way to cheat that process, no way to solve the problem with brute force. The only thing you can do is spend a great amount of time preparing yourself, experiencing the world, seeking enlightenment, and learning to perceive existence as a god instead of a mortal. That can take thousands of years… centuries, at least."

His tone turned wistful.

"But didn't you say that your world might not even last a mere decade? No matter how much of a genius you are, you won't be able to fundamentally transform yourself into a being worthy of becoming a deity in a measly decade. Let alone actually becoming one — there are plenty of insurmountable obstacles on the path to Apotheosis other than simply being suitable to attempt it. Obstacles that you have neither time nor resources to overcome. So… sorry. I'll have to disappoint you today."

Sunny studied him for a few moments, then sighed and looked away.

He stayed quiet for a while, finishing his wine in silence.

Once the bottle was empty, Sunny shook his head.

"You say that there is no way to cheat the process, but you are wrong. There is one way."

There was the Nightmare Spell.

However, therein lay the problem.

Sunny, after all, was not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell anymore.

Even if he wanted to attempt the Fifth Nightmare, he simply could not. The Spell would not send him into a Nightmare, and all he would get for approaching a Seed was an irresistible dose of Corruption.

Uttering a curse, Sunny tossed the empty bottle into the depths of the ivory maze.

Then, he sighed, disappeared from his chair, and returned a moment later with the bottle in hand.

Whether he was Supreme or not, there was no excuse for littering.

Sitting down once again, Sunny frowned and looked at the distant radiance of a furious essence storm.

'How… troublesome.'

His mood had turned somber.

Chapter-2267: Unwelcome Choice

Sunny remained silent for a long time, looking into the distance with a somber expression on his pale, eerily beautiful face.

His eyes were drowning in darkness.

'So that is how it is.'

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Against all odds, he had become a demigod — a being of such great and dreadful power that almost no one else could ever hope to endure its crushing weight. A walking calamity of apocalyptic proportions… a creature who was much closer to a mythical force than to a mortal man.

He had gone from being a nameless slave to being a king…

A nameless king, but a king nevertheless.

And yet, in the Age of the Nightmare Spell, even that great power was not enough. Simply being Supreme was not enough to achieve his purpose.

Which meant that he had to grow stronger... but to do that, he had to become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell again. He had to possess a True Name again. He had to become entwined into the vast tapestry of fate… again.

That was easier said than done.

In truth, there was only one way that Sunny knew of — and even then, he could not be sure that it would work.

That way, of course, was to hunt down the Vile Thieving Bird and get his fate back from its talons.

That odious thing was a Cursed Terror, though… and he had a sinking suspicion that even among the dark deities of the Dream Realm, the loathsome Thieving Bird was a singular existence. Otherwise, it would not have survived being hated both by the gods and by those who dwelled in the Void.

It would not have been able to steal Weaver's eye, and it would not have been able to resurrect itself by crawling its way back to reality from the depths of a Nightmare — which was what had happened, most likely.

Sunny had not even defeated a Cursed Beast, yet. But even if he could brave the Nightmare Desert, enter the real Tomb of Ariel — which he most likely would, considering the future version of himself he had encountered in the Estuary — and somehow slay the Thieving Bird…

Sunny was not sure that he wanted to.

After all, getting his fate and True Name back would give him something he wished for desperately… but it would also give him something that he had strived to escape desperately.

One had to be careful what they wished for.

After reclaiming his fate, Sunny would be remembered by those he cared about… but he would also become chained by the Shadow Bond again.

'Ah, how poetic.'

He smiled bitterly and shook his head.

Sunny did not know if he wanted to have his fate back. He felt ambivalent about the whole ordeal… that was why he had taken steps to prepare for his eventual return to the Tomb of Ariel, but also why he did not press the issue, allowing himself to go with the flow of events and remain indecisive.

Natural Apotheosis was not completely out of the question yet,

either, precisely because of the nature of the Tomb of Ariel. Eurys had said that one needed time to become a Spirit — that was what humans of the Sacred Rank were called, apparently — and there was a Great River of Time conveniently hidden in the depths of the Black Pyramid.

In any case, whether Sunny would try to face the Thieving Bird to become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell once again or seek Apotheosis without its help, he would have to prepare thoroughly.

There were quite a few things he had to accomplish first before leaving on this uncertain journey.

So…

He could make the fateful decision later.

Letting out a sigh, Sunny glanced at Eurys and smiled.

"Why are minor deities called Spirits, anyway? I expected that title to be more… I don't know, awesome. Something like Angels, for example…"

Eurys suddenly shivered, his teeth clattering.

"Angels? Goodness, boy. Why would you mention those dreadful beings?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Well… no reason, really. Why, what is so terrible about them? Aren't angels supposed to be divine heralds or something like that?"

The ancient skeleton slowly shook his skull.

"What? No, of course not… who told you that? Angels are not heralds of the gods. Angels are of the Void — they are an especially harrowing kind of Void Beings. Needless to say, people like you and I have no business knowing of them, let alone beholding them. So, keep that word out of your mouth, boy. Better yet, keep it out of your mind entirely."

Sunny stared at him with a confused expression.

"Well, okay. Wait, no… then what about the Nephilim? Aren't they children of… those beings you mentioned? Of those beings and the gods?"

Eurys chuckled.

"For someone who is best friends with a nephilim, you sure are ignorant about the abomi… adorable kind, huh? Why, yes. They are indeed children of an unholy union between the divine and the profane — something that should not have existed, but did. It does make some sense, I guess, considering that the gods themselves were an especially harrowing kind of Void Beings. The most harrowing kind, maybe."

He laughed.

"You know… it feels quite liberating to spout heresy about the gods, knowing that the gods are long dead. Ha! In any case, no one really knows for certain how the Nephilim came about, how their existence was even possible, or which god had sired them. But it must have been Sun God — who else but the god of passion, after all?"

His laughter died out slowly, and after falling silent for a short while, Eurys added in a tone of melancholy:

"Nephilim were not welcome anywhere, so they usually kept to themselves. Still… they joined the army of the Demons when Nether rebelled against the gods, and fought side by side with us against the Divine Host. And they died with us, one after another."

The darkness nestling in the eye sockets of the ancient skull suddenly seemed deeper than before.

Chapter-2268: Unbroken Curse

The ancient skeleton let out a sigh and turned his skull to stare at Sunny. He remained silent for a while, then said neutrally:

"As to your original question, Sacred beings are called Spirits because that is what they are. They are spirits of places, of concepts, of laws… well, in a way. Actually, the word 'daemon' meant the same thing, originally. Because daemons were the first Sacred beings, and therefore the first Spirits."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What? Weren't daemons Divine?"

Eurys nodded.

"Oh, they were. However, they were not born Divine. At the dawn of the Age of Gods, the seven newborn daemons were merely Sacred. They became Divine swiftly, though, as if it was in their very nature. Weaver was the first, and Nether was the last. Quite fitting."

As he said those words, a few sparks of light drifted above Sunny, forcing him to grimace.

His soul was still being destroyed by the Shadow Realm.

Therefore, he did not have much more time to waste.

Raising from his chair, Sunny glanced at Eurys and asked:

"I guess you won't simply tell me all about the daemons, the gods, the Doom War, the Nine… and most of all, about Weaver?"

The ancient skeleton chuckled.

"I think I already told you enough, no?"

Sunny grimaced, then nodded briefly.

"Prepare to die, then."

He hesitated for a few moments, then added in a less resolute voice:

"Or… I don't know. Prepare to be prepared to die? I am not sure that I can actually kill you just yet."

The ancient skeleton stared at him with a grin.

"There is only one way to find out, is there not?"

Sunny remained motionless for a while, collecting himself.

Then, he reached into the shadows and manifested them into the shape of a fearsome black odachi. Since his essence was Supreme now, the shadow sword he had created was akin to a Supreme weapon, as well — and a tremendously deadly Supreme weapon, at that, considering that it had been created from the ancient darkness of the Shadow Realm.

Sunny studied Eurys for a few moments.

Killing an undying skeleton was not a straightforward task. After all, Eurys did not have a beating heart or a functioning brain that could be destroyed. He could not bleed to death or succumb to debilitating wounds. In fact, he did not even seem to possess a soul — at least not one that Sunny could see or sense.

Even his shadow was no different from the shadows cast by inanimate objects.

Their surroundings were dark, but the distant light of a vast essence storm still reached them. So, the shadow of the ancient skeleton could just barely be seen, laying on the black dust beneath him.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny raised his odachi and shaped his will into a slaying blade.

Then, he thrust his sword down, imbuing it with tyrannical killing intent — as lethal and deadly a strike as he could muster.

The blade of the odachi slid between the skeleton's ribs, passed through where his heart would have been, and plunged into the shadow below.

A powerful gust of wind rose above the graveyard of serpents, and the towering pillars of ancient bones groaned, a few of them toppling thunderously somewhere in the distance.

A cloud of dust rose into the air.

By the time the dust settled, Eurys was laying motionlessly on the ground, staring at Sunny with lifeless, empty eyes sockets.

A few moments later, he said:

"Well… that was disappointing."

Sunny clicked his tongue.

"Damnation. Hey… it's not me, it's you! I am not bad at killing things, you are just too damn hard to kill. Can you even be killed?"

Eurys let out a long sigh.

"It should be possible. I guess you are not powerful enough to break Shadow God's curse yet, boy."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then dismissed the black odachi and took a step back.

"Then I'll get stronger. I am relatively new to being Supreme… maybe things will be different when I learn to wield my power better."

He hesitated, then asked neutrally:

"You are not in a hurry, are you?"

Eurys did not answer immediately.

Eventually, he laughed.

"Well, you saw those unfortunate fellows in the White Desert. They have been fighting each other for thousands of years already, and are

not going to stop anytime soon. However… while they bear the same curse as me, they are different from me. That is because they have long lost themselves, turning into mindless husks."

His laughter dimmed.

"I, on the other hand, have managed to preserve most of myself intact. Not through sheer willpower or because I am special, though — simply because I was nailed to that damn tree before the battle ended. It was the tree that kept me whole. Now that I am free, however, I'll become a mindless beast just like the rest of them soon. My, oh my! I hoped to die before that happens."

Sunny stared at him somberly for a little while.

"How much time do you have left?"

Eurys shrugged and answered nonchalantly:

"More than your world has left, I'd say."

Sunny nodded.

"Then I'll come back to try and kill you when I am stronger. Maybe once I become a Spirit, maybe sooner."

As he dismissed the Shadow Chair and turned around to leave, Eurys called out to him in a creaky voice:

"Didn't you hear what I said, boy? You have no chance of becoming a Spirit. It's impossible!"

Sunny grinned.

"I heard you well. But… says who? The world has changed a lot since your time, Eurys. And if it didn't change enough… why, then I'll just have to go and change it more."

A rat from the outskirts had become a king.

If something like that was possible, then why would becoming a god be any different?

Especially considering that his companion was none other than Changing Star.

Walking away, Sunny raised a hand and waved.

"I'll kill you soon, Eurys of the Nine!"

Chapter-2269: Let There Be Light

"It's definitely going to work this time!"

A group of tired engineers, scientists, and Awakened stared at a young woman wearing a formal suit, a buttoned-up blouse, and a white lab coat with numb expressions. The woman looked just as tired — there were dark circles under her eyes, many strands of hair had escaped her messy bun, and her lab coat was charred in several places.

However, her scathing gaze was still full of vigor and energy.

"Chief Bethany… h—how about we call it a day?"

"Please…"

"Somebody find Master Quentin… only he can save us!"

Hearing the complaints, Beth frowned.

"What is this I'm hearing? A mutiny?"

The engineers, the scientists, and the Awakened paled.

"N—no…"

"Of course not, Chief!"

"We were just joking, Chief!"

She nodded in satisfaction, then turned to a complicated control board in front of her.

Outside, Bastion was shrouded in darkness. A bright moon hung

above the lake, bathing it in pale radiance, and although the streets were illuminated here and there by mundane or enchanted lanterns, most of the city was resting in the embrace of shadows.

The city was too large and populous to be entirely asleep, but most citizens were sleeping in their homes, waiting for dawn to come so that they could continue their work. After all, nobody could work in darkness.

Well… few people could.

Beth turned her head and looked at one of her Awakened subordinates — a beautiful girl with pale skin and raven-black hair, barely out of her teenage years by the look of it. The girl was a recent addition to the team and worked as somewhat of an intern, assisting everyone who needed help with menial tasks while she was learning the ropes.

Unlike the rest of the sorry bunch, the youngest member of the team never complained.

"You there, Rani… you just returned from building the road across Godgrave, right?"

The girl nodded with a smile.

"Yes, Chief! I've worked on the Dark Road."

The Dark Road stretched across the arms of the dead deity and the entire Collarbone Plain, connecting the human territories in the north. Some of its sections lay under the open sky, but most of it was shrouded by the eternal darkness that the Lord of Shadows had summoned before slaying the King of Swords and being slain by Changing Star in turn.

Needless to say, building a road across a Death Zone had not been an easy project.

Beth looked sternly at the rest of her subordinates.

"You see, Rani spent months doing arduous manual labor in total darkness while dreadful Nightmare Creatures and carnivorous plants

were trying to eat her. So, what are you, sorry lot, complaining about? When was the last time one of you was eaten?"

The team members looked at each other.

"Wasn't Russel eaten last week, though?"

"Yes, I was! I spent a whole minute in an abomination's stomach! Luckily, Master Quentin was there to kill the beast… thank the Immortal Flame…"

"The cable-laying crews are getting attacked all the time!"

Beth grimaced.

"Whatever! We are doing another run. You guys can sleep tomorrow!"

As groans resounded in the control room, Rani summoned a leather backpack and pulled something out of it. The team members looked at a tin can with burning eyes.

"Wait. I'm not seeing things, am I?"

"Is that… coffee?"

"It's coffee, guys! Real coffee!"

Rani smiled.

"Yeah. They are growing coffee trees in Ravenheart now, you know? I got a few cans as payment. How about I brew some for everyone while Chief Bethany does the calibrations?"

The team members exploded with cheers. Some even shed tears.

Beth, meanwhile, was studying the control board — half of it mechanical, half etched with runes and embedded with soul shards.

"I don't get it… everything should have worked."

She remained silent for a minute, then called for an Awakened operating the communication Memories.

"Rivergate Hydro, it's Center. Are the turbines spinning? The generators are powered up, too? Okay… I see. Keep an eye on the readings and let me know if something seems out of the ordinary."

"Honey… I mean, Master Quentin, you repaired the cable, right? Are you sure that there are no other burned sections? What? What do you mean, a Nightmare Creature chewed through the cable? Why would it… never mind. Just let me know when you finish mending it!"

"Fire crews, stand by. The delay was caused by a severed cable. We will make another attempt in ten minutes… no, it's not going to explode again! There is absolutely zero possibility that it will explode again. Nothing is going to explode! But just in case it does… you know what to do…"

Soon, the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the control room. The team members savored the invigorating drink while Beth was staring at the panels and discussing various details with her subordinates through the communication Memories. From time to time, she looked into the wide window to study the dark landscape of the city below.

High above, the graceful silhouette of the Ivory Tower was contoured against the pale disk of the moon.

Finally, Quentin sent a message confirming that the cables laid from the dam built on the ruins of former Rivergate to Bastion were mended. The team members ran to their posts, and a tense silence settled in the control room.

Beth remained near the control panel, accompanied by the young assistant, Rani.

"...You're originally from NQSC, right, Rani?"

The girl nodded.

Beth took a last look at the readings, then inhaled deeply.

"I'm from the Southern Quadrant myself. Although I spent quite a few years in NQSC as a student. Oh, and I visited later as a refugee, to pass through the Dream Gate."

She lingered for a while.

"The infrastructure there… ah, it's simply divine. A work of pure genius. But…"

Beth placed her hand on a large switch and suddenly smiled brightly.

"In a few decades, Bastion will not be inferior in any way. And every other city in the Dream Realm, too."

With that, she pulled the switch.

A strange hum suddenly filled the control room, reverberating through the walls.

And then…

The city outside the window suddenly lit up, just like her face had.

Countless streetlamps shone with the bright, steady electric light.

Like stars in the night sky.

The darkness was chased away, replaced with pure, soft radiance.

Beth exhaled slowly and smiled with satisfaction.

"Told you…"

Chapter-2270: Food For the People

Far away, in Ravenheart, a woman with beautiful emerald eyes was standing on a stone platform, hiding from the falling ash under an elegant umbrella. The lower part of her face was protected from the wind by a fluffy scarf, and she was wearing an exquisitely embroidered dress under a fashionable coat.

The woman was looking down at her dainty shoes with regret. The soft leather was already covered in soot, and the silver buckles had lost their shine.

She sighed.

"Ah. I really hate this place."

All around her, the city was boiling with life. Ravenheart had expanded greatly in the last year, spilling over the slopes of the volcano like a stone forest. The settlement on the great bridge had grown, as well — in fact, the length of the bridge was not enough to house every Awakened anymore, so there were enormous platforms hanging from it like terraces, with their own streets, buildings, gardens, and parks.

The latter were encased in glass, of course, in order to protect the fragile plants from the bitter cold.

There was another platform being lowered from the side of the bridge at the moment. Its unimaginable weight was supported by enormous cables, which in turn were being held by towering Nightmare Creatures.

The hideous abominations were grinding their fangs and growling, their hulking muscles drawn taut under their hides — below, a

swarm of Awakened builders were getting ready to receive the platform and affix it to the rigid frame.

Nightmare Creatures were everywhere in Ravenheart, actually, performing all kinds of tasks — all thanks to Beastmaster and her eerie Aspect. That was in large part why the city had been able to change and expand so swiftly.

Only the magnificent black palace on the other side of the bridge remained unchanged. Well… the palace itself was the same, but its master was different.

The woman glanced at the distant palace with a dreamy smile, then caught herself and turned back to the city with a sigh.

"What a dreary place."

Since the most readily available resource here was dark stone, most of the buildings were of the same color. In fact, there used to be very little colors in Ravenheart at all — only black stone, white snow, and ash.

Now, however, there were plenty of vibrant islands in the stark sea of black and white. Here and there, crowns of crimson trees rose above the buildings, and crimson flowers bloomed along the streets. Overall, the aesthetic sensibility of the city was vastly improved.

The woman looked at the splashes of vibrant crimson with satisfaction.

After all, she was the one responsible for introducing color and vibrancy to Ravenheart…

Even if it was just to pass the time.

Soon enough, she saw a caravan climb the slope of the volcano and enter the city. Nightmare Creatures were pulling the heavy carts full of precious cargo, with human guards walking alongside them with confident strides.

"Finally!"

Soon after the caravan arrived, a tall figure entered the platform and looked at the woman's dainty shoes and elegant umbrella with a dubious expression.

"Hey, Bliss."

The woman looked at the stranger coldly.

"Welcome to Ravenheart, Saint Helie."

Then, she smiled brightly behind her scarf, took a step forward, and gave the taller woman a hug.

"You're finally here!"

Helie grinned, as well, then laughed.

"You're going to poke my eyes out with that umbrella…"

Bliss took a step back and held the umbrella higher to shield both of them from the falling ash.

"Come, come. I just bought this coat! Do you know how hard it is to wash off soot?"

The two Saints left the platform and headed deeper into the city at a brisk pace. As they walked, Helie looked around, and then said hesitantly:

"This place does not quite seem to suit you, Bliss."

The other woman sighed.

"Oh, I hate it here. But what could I do? Not everyone has an ancestral Citadel to return to like you lofty Legacies . We, newer Saints, are a transient sort… granted, Summer Knight did offer me a prime piece of real estate during the war."

She smiled brightly.

"But I turned him down. So, when Song Seishan invited me to come here personally, there was no reason to say no. Don't worry, though

— I'll be done in a few years and come back east. In fact…"

Her emerald eyes glistened.

"You brought it, right?"

Helie looked at the lively Saint with a hint of resentment and nodded.

"I did. You know, I just returned from the Eastern Quadrant. But instead of welcoming me from the battlefield with open arms, you sent me on a deadly errand to Godgrave instead. Have you no shame?"

Bliss grinned.

"What I don't have are hooves. But you do. So, you can get to Godgrave and back way faster."

Helie looked at her in disbelief.

"Wow. Just… wow. How callous!"

Soon enough, they entered a large building on the outskirts of the city. It was guarded by dozens of Awakened warriors and a handful of Masters, all wearing tense expressions on their faces. Helie glanced at them briefly, then frowned.

Somehow, it did not seem like the soldiers were protecting the building from potential threats from the outside. Instead, it seemed like they were protecting the city from the building.

"Bliss… just what did Seishan ask you to do?"

The other woman folded her umbrella, took off her scarf, and smiled.

"You'll see!"

A younger woman appeared out of nowhere, looked at them, and then asked nervously:

"Saint Bliss, is it here?"

Bliss nodded.

"Indeed. You two should know each other… Helie, this is Ascended Shakti. Shakti, this is Saint Helie. She brought the new samples."

Helie studied the younger woman. She vaguely remembered seeing her among the Fire Keepers.

"Let's go!"

A few minutes later, Helie was standing in front of a heavily reinforced glass dome, looking inside with a troubled expression.

Inside the dome… a sea of scarlet moss was growing on the rich ashen soil. Here and there, bones of Nightmare Creatures protruded from the carpet of moss, growing smaller at an alarming rate.

In front of the cell, there were various tables loaded with different, quite mundane plants.

Bliss and Shakti were preparing to open the dome to allow Helie to deposit the plants of the scarlet jungle she had scavenged and stored in a special Memory to be transported.

She hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"Can you tell me now?"

Bliss looked at her, then pointed to one of the tables.

"You see that? That… is a common potato."

Then, she turned and pointed at the glass cell.

"And that is moss from the Godgrave jungle."

Helie nodded.

"And why is the moss from Godgrave here?"

Bliss smiled.

"Do you have any idea how miraculous that jungle is? How fast its flora grows, and how resilient it is? Well, of course you do. We both suffered that damned jungle during the war, after all."

Then, she picked up a potato and showed it to Helie.

"On the other hand, there are three billion people that need to be fed once they are all resettled in the Dream Realm. So, if we can just transplant some qualities of the scarlet moss to a common potato… imagine the possibilities!"

Helie stared at her silently for a while.

"Bliss… don't tell me… that you plan to crossbreed the horrors of the scarlet jungle with waking world's plants?"

The elegant Saintess blinked a couple of times.

"Well, of course not. I am not planning to…"

As Helie sighed with relief, she added:

"I already did. Where do you think all those trees and flowers on the streets of Ravenheart come from?"

With that, she put the potato down like a precious jewel and turned back to the dome.

"Come!"

Chapter-2271: A Beautiful Garden

An endless expanse of tumultuous waves rested under a twilight sky, shrouded in mist and illuminated by the pale light of countless shimmering stars. Powerful winds blew above the surface of the undulating sea, while below it lay the unfathomable darkness of abyssal depths.

The distant horizon was hidden behind a wall of heavy clouds, heralding the arrival of a devastating storm.

Indifferent to the daunting threat of the inevitable calamity, a colossal ship moved across the waves at great speed. At least a kilometer across from port to starboard, the ancient vessel still appeared narrow due to its great length. Its ancient hull was made of wood, but had no seams, as if someone had hollowed out a branch of an inconceivable tree once to create it.

The ship was like a city in and of itself, with dozens of vast decks, beautiful palaces, tall pagodas built on its surface, and great mysteries hiding in its boundless holds. It had wild groves, rushing streams, deep lakes, and gentle meadows.

It was Night Garden, the Great Citadel ruled by Saint Jet, the Steward of the South.

The miraculous vessel had been mostly desolate once, back when it belonged to the House of Night. Even though thousands of Awakened had called it home, their number had not been enough to crowd its many decks and countless holds — most of the palaces and pagodas had stood empty, many of the lower decks had remained unexplored, and the groves had grown untended.

Things were different now.

Millions of refugees had arrived aboard the great ship through the Dream Gate, and so, the Night Garden was transformed.

The palaces were now inhabited dwellings. The wild groves had turned into cultivated fruit gardens. The meadows had become fertile fields. Children were playing on the shores of the lakes and swimming in the clear water…

Countless colorful lanterns illuminated the floating city, making it glow like a vibrant jewel in the dim twilight of the misty sea.

Naeve was observing the lively landscape of the Night Garden from a vantage point on the bow of the ship with a complicated expression on his face. It was good to see the Great Citadel braving the perilous expanse of the Stormsea once again… it was also rewarding to see it become so lively and thriving, home to countless people.

But at the same time, he could not help but remember the desolate tranquility of its former self… the starlit peace of how the Night Garden used to be under the rule of his clan.

His former clan. The House of Night did not exist anymore.

"Daddy!"

Hearing a childish voice, Naeve erased the melancholy from his face and turned around with a smile. In the next moment, a girl with vibrant indigo eyes and hair lunged herself into his embrace at full speed — he caught her and laughed quietly, spinning her around.

"Wait, wait… you are too big now to ram your poor dad like a hungry shark…"

The girl frowned fiercely.

"Am not!"

Neave laughed again.

His daughter was already twelve — a fact he sometimes found hard to believe.

His family had finally rejoined him aboard the Night Garden a few months ago. Even then, he did not get to spend as much time with them as he would have wanted to, since there were too many ships in need of guidance and too few Nightwalkers left alive.

So, their lives were split unevenly between the Stormsea, where the Night Garden and the rest of the Citadels needed to be settled and defended against the perils of the Dream Realm, and the waking world, where naval convoys had to serve as the last tenuous connection between the isolated Quadrants.

It had gotten somewhat better after the last of the Stormsea Citadels were reclaimed, and especially after Changing Star used her Dream Gate to evacuate the last remaining humans from South America… still, with the war raging in the Eastern Quadrant and the infrastructure of the waking world slowly collapsing, nobody had time to rest.

Putting his daughter on the ground, Naeve patted her on the head.

"So, you're done with school for today?"

Schools were a relatively recent development. With millions of people settling in the Dream Realm and countless more on the way, there were naturally many children here now — some having arrived with their parents, some having been born under the alien sky. All these children had to be educated and taught.

The Sword Domain and the Song Domain had done little in that regard in the four years prior to the war. There had been schools, of course, but too few — and even those that had been established lacked a unified teaching program and vision. So, most children were either homeschooled by their parents or handed off to caretakers chosen from the members of small refugee communities while the parents worked.

Creating a comprehensive school curriculum for children who were destined to grow up in this strange new world was not an easy task, either. After all, the Dream Realm often refused to follow the laws that had seemed axiomatic on Earth. Were the teachers supposed to instruct their pupils on how electricity worked, considering that it did

not work the same way, or at all, here?

Granted, Naeve had heard that someone in Bastion managed to build a functioning hydroelectric power plant. If so, the Night Garden was certain to benefit soon, considering that the great ship itself was known to attract and absorb lightning from the endless storms.

In any case, things had changed after the war. The government got involved, employing the services of many renowned Dream Realm experts. From what Naeve knew, the head of the project was someone named Julius — a seasoned explorer and esteemed academic of the First Generation, formerly employed as an instructor of the Awakened Academy.

Under the energetic old man's leadership, the universal education guidelines were swiftly developed, iterated, and implemented. The Night Garden was largely under the government's control, so it was the first city to benefit from the education initiative — the other cities in the Dream Realm would be opening enough schools to accommodate every child soon, but here, kids were already receiving a proper education.

Naeve's daughter, it seemed, was enjoying school greatly.

Which was why he was surprised to see her before the classes were supposed to end.

She nodded with a grin.

"Teacher let us go early! Something about needing to return home before the... the transition?"

Naeve lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"Right. So why aren't you home, young lady?"

The girl grinned.

"Why would I go straight home when there's no homework? Dad… are you crazy?!"

Then, she giggled and said:

"I met Grandpa on the way. He brought me here."

As she did, there was a sound of uncomfortable coughing from behind her. There, a man with smooth ebony skin and perfectly white hair stood, his eyes glinting with shades of indigo and deep blue. His towering figure was broad and fearsome, but at the moment, there was a deeply somber expression on his face.

"Brat, I told you not to call me Grandpa."

She looked at him innocently.

"But Grandpa Bloodwave… you're my dad's uncle. That makes you a grandpa!"

Saint Bloodwave looked at her silently, then sighed.

"...Great-uncle. At least call me a great-uncle."

Naeve caught himself looking at his daughter, feeling both warm and cold at the same time.

'Good. It's good.'

It was good that she could smile, grin, laugh, and tease her elders without a second thought, still. After everything that they had gone through two years before — all the terror, all the loss, and all the change — Naeve himself could rarely smile without forcing himself to.

Children were much more resilient than adults.

That was why he hoped that his daughter and her peers would build a better world, in the future. A kinder world, even if it was not the world their parents had been born into.

Letting out a sigh, he turned to Bloodwave.

"Uncle."

Naeve hesitated for a few moments, and then asked tentatively:

"Is she going through with it?"

He did not mean his daughter, of course.

He meant Soul Reaper Jet, the ruler of the Night Garden and the de facto leader of the government.

Bloodwave nodded.

"She is. In fact… because of the storm, it is going to happen sooner. It is going to happen now."

Naeve closed his eyes for a moment.

The war against the Skinwalker was not proceeding smoothly, and the evacuation of the Eastern Quadrant was not happening as fast as it had to happen. After all, there was only one Dream Gate — the refugees had to be brought to a single gathering point from all across the continent first, then screened thoroughly to not let any vessels of the vile abomination pass through.

The Western Quadrant was drowning in the tide of Nightmare Gates, as well.

So, Changing Star and her Steward had come up with an emergency measure. Something to tip the scales in favor of humanity, at least for a while.

But their decision was not without risk.

Naeve opened his eyes and looked at his uncle.

"Are we… sure that it is the best course of action?"

Bloodwave shrugged.

"I am not. But if you have objections, you can go talk to Soul Reaper yourself."

Naeve raised an eyebrow.

"Why don't you?"

His uncle looked at him silently, then cleared his throat.

"Well. It's because... I am scared of that woman."

Naeve's daughter looked at her great-uncle with wide eyes.

"I thought you didn't fear anything, Grandpa. Why would you be scared of Auntie Jet?"

Bloodwave was not a very expressive man, but at the moment, he looked like someone stabbed him in the heart.

He remained silent for a bit, then grumbled:

"How come Soul Reaper is an auntie, but I am a grandpa?"

Naeve wanted to chuckle, but at the moment, he felt a subtle change happen to the world.

The stars seemed to have grown brighter, and the great ship trembled slightly below their feet.

"It's starting. Look!"

The three of them looked ahead.

There…

A white line suddenly cut the fabric of reality in front of the Night Garden, falling from the heavens into the turbulent waters below.

Then, it expanded, turning into a towering, wide rift.

The rift was filled with nothing but incandescent radiance for a moment. Then, for the first time in thousands of years, pure daylight shone onto the surface of the Stormsea from the titanic Dream Gate.

Naeve took a deep breath, then smiled faintly.

"I guess we are really doing it."

Soon enough, the bow of the colossal ship plunged into the wide fissure of the Dream Gate.

And a moment later, it cut the waves of a different sea.

To be specific, the Night Garden had entered the abomination-infested expanse of the Indian Ocean.

It had arrived on Earth.

Chapter-2272: Shady Business

Autumn was slowly surrendering to the tyranny of winter, and frigid winds were blowing across the crowded streets of NQSC. Awakened June had neglected summoning a PTV, so he had to walk quite a distance from the nearest public transport terminal to his destination. It had seemed like a good idea at first, but by now, he was regretting his choice.

He found himself weary of cold weather ever since returning from Antarctica.

But then again, he also found himself weary of hot weather ever since returning from Godgrave.

Sinking deeper into his coat, June sighed.

'Truly, nature has nothing good to offer at all.'

People of his generation were truly unfortunate.

There was a reason why he had decided to walk, though. June had not been to his hometown for a long time, so he was curious to see how much NQSC had changed.

The changes were subtle, but undeniable.

The buildings were the same, the roads were the same, and the crisp tastelessness of the filtered air was also the same — here in the center of the city, at least. However, the atmosphere was entirely different.

It was both much more lively and much more feverish, with excitement and fear mixed together in equal measure.

Most of the people seemed strangely uplifted and confident. They were full of energy. It was as if bright sparks were shining in their

eyes — metaphorically speaking… for most. June found it strange that they looked so vibrant despite knowing that the world was coming to an end.

But on the other hand, he understood. Even he, once a bitter cynic, felt the same. It was hard not to feel awed after having his life saved by the miraculous flames of a living goddess.

People everywhere had spent decades living in a world that they secretly knew was dying. Now, its death sentence had been officially pronounced — but, at the same time, they were given hope and shown an unambiguous path to salvation. They had been given a clear goal. More than that, there was someone to guide them on that thorny path.

A person who exemplified the very ideals of benevolence, virtue, and righteous power. Changing Star of the Immortal Flame Clan… a living legend, someone who was known to make miracles happen.

In simple terms, she had a stellar reputation and a proven track record of leading people out of impossible situations. So, instead of giving up, people were reinvigorated, throwing themselves into working toward a common goal with abandon.

…Of course, not all of them.

That was why the atmosphere in NQSC was so feverish. There were also those who were panicking, surrendering to despair, and just plain losing their minds. As June walked, he noticed the carcasses of several burned PTVs on the side of the road. The walls were marred with scars left by the war. A crowd of protesters had gathered near a tall barrier constructed around an active Nightmare Gate.

Police officers were wearing riot armor and staring at the protesters coldly from behind the transparent visors of their alloy helmets. They looked like a group of knights grievously outnumbered by a horde of angry peasants.

June shook his head.

'What are these folks even protesting against?'

Well, it did not really matter to him. He doubted that he would spend a long time in NQSC — there were too many emergencies happening every day all across the world, and even more work to be done in the Dream Realm. So, his unexpected vacation would most likely be short.

Finally, he reached his destination — the central government headquarters.

It was a vast and heavily defended complex, built with utility in mind and no regard for aesthetics. June studied the automatic turrets towering above the walls and the Awakened warriors standing guard around the perimeter, his trained eye discerning many details that many others would have missed.

Being a government grunt himself, June had no reason to seek out vulnerability points and potential escape routes… but old habits died hard.

He was allowed inside the complex after going through a complicated security check and eventually found himself in the depths of one of its underground levels. There, a few other Awakened were waiting patiently in front of an unmarked office — when June arrived, they studied him with wary gazes.

He studied them, as well, feeling pins and needles in his sword arm.

'...Professionals.'

There was an imperceptible quality that those like themselves recognized in each other. A subtle mark of a specialist… of a person who had reached the hidden heights of their bloody vocation.

Not all of them were consummate killers — there were those with Utility Aspects, as well. In fact, those were often much more precious than the combat specialists.

But most of them were.

Smiling amicably, June nodded at the Awakened elites and took a seat.

'I do wonder what it's all about.'

The reason he had returned to NQSC and was now sitting in front of an unmarked office was a bit strange. It was a rumor… no, more of an urban legend among the seasoned government grunts like him.

A scary story about an absolutely secret, untraceable elite force that operated in the shadows of the Human Domain. A force more elite than even the exalted Fire Keepers themselves, and arguably more deadly.

Most people dismissed these rumors as a scary story, but some dug deeper.

June was one of those who had investigated the rumors more seriously. As a result, he found himself participating in a vicious and, quite honestly, more than a little shady trial. Having ruthlessly defeated all other contenders, he finally found himself here.

His curiosity was going to be sated soon.

He spent about an hour in the waiting room before being summoned into the office. There, an Awakened woman was sitting behind a desk, checking something on the screen in front of her.

She had a petite build, with mousy hair and an unassuming face. However, her gaze was calm and confident, making June feel a little flustered.

"Awakened June?"

He nodded.

"I am Awakened Kim. Please take a seat."

June sat on the only free chair in the office and looked at Awakened Kim quietly. After checking her screen one last time, she turned to him and said in an even tone:

"June... city of origin: NQSC. Infected by the Nightmare Spell at age sixteen, Awakened an Aspect of the Ascended Rank — supposedly. Stellar marks at the Academy, joined the government after

Awakening. Member of the First Evacuation Army… Second Irregular Company, East Antarctica. Distinguished service. Later retired from service, employed at various private outlets as a security specialist and bodyguard. In Godgrave… soldier of the Sword Army — Vanishing Lake expedition, Godheart, Siege of the Greater Crossing… rejoined the government forces six months ago."

She paused and looked at June, who smiled.

"That's me."

Awakened Kim nodded.

What she said next, however, made June freeze and feel a cold shiver run down his spine.

"Clandestine alias: Corsair. Black market abomination hunter, enforcer… assassin. Seventy-six confirmed contracts — actual number unknown. Ninety-four percent success rate. Fallen Nightmare Creatures, unhinged Ascended… an unsanctioned Death Zone expedition? Impressive."

June remained silent for a few moments, hiding his shock and unease.

Eventually, he coughed.

"Uh… that's also me."

Awakened Kim — whomever the hell she was — seemed to know everything already, and in chilling detail at that. So, there was no reason to play coy.

She studied him intently for a bit, then asked with a hint of curiosity:

"Say, the Pandavar massacre… that wouldn't happen to have been you, by chance?"

June met her gaze, considered his next words for a moment or two, then smiled.

"Those guys? Well… they got into some really appalling business for

a fallen noble house. Otherwise, the bounty on their heads would not have been that high."

Awakened Kim lingered for a few moments, then chuckled suddenly.

"A corsair hunting down pirates, huh? The irony…"

She paused and seemed to hesitate for a short while.

Eventually, she asked:

"You are Vandal's grandson, aren't you? I... met your grandfather in Antarctica. He was a great Awakened."

June looked at her for a few long moments, his expression turning stiff.

"...He wasn't great enough, I guess. Otherwise, he would have survived."

Then, he crossed his arms and asked:

"So, are we done with the interrogation part? How about you tell me what this is about?"

Awakened Kim gave him an evaluating look, then nodded.

"It's simple, really. There is important work that needs to be done, and you've been evaluated to be the right person to do it. It is a… special kind of assignment. You won't be working for the government anymore, but know that what we do is exclusively for the sake of humanity. The only entity we report to is the Ivory Tower itself — well, when our boss feels like it, at least."

June blinked.

'When… the boss feels like it?'

What kind of boss would be audacious enough to neglect reporting their business to a literal goddess?

And who would be important enough to report directly to Changing

Star?

Noticing his reaction, Awakened Kim smiled faintly.

"Note that I can't tell you anything else until you agree. You'll be sworn to secrecy, of course. And if you break that oath…"

June raised an eyebrow.

"Don't tell me. I'll be killed?"

Awakened Kim chuckled.

"Killed? No, nothing that amateurish…"

She shook her head and smiled benevolently.

"Instead, you'll be brainwashed and have your memories erased. Then, we'll return you to where we took you from."

June laughed, thinking that it was a joke.

But under the unassuming woman's calm gaze, his laughter slowly died down.

'...Wait, is she serious?'

He stared at her in silence.

There were... all kinds of Aspects out there.

Awakened Kim raised an eyebrow:

"Any questions?"

June contemplated his answer a little, then shrugged and nodded readily.

"Only one. The most important question."

He paused for a moment and with a glint in his eyes:

"How's the pay?"

The unassuming woman blinked a couple of times, then looked down and sighed.

"Oh, she's going to like this one…"

Shaking her head, Awakened Kim raised her head and gave June a piercing look.

"The pay is stellar."

He nodded in satisfaction.

"Great. Where do I sign?"

Standing up from behind her desk, she smiled.

"There's no need to sign anywhere."

Awakened Kim paused for a moment, then added hesitantly:

"Oh, but I should ask. How do you feel about tattoos?"

Chapter-2273: Shadow Clan

The next morning, June returned to the government complex at the break of dawn. He had finished his business in the city and packed a bag as instructed, informing those who still bothered to check on him from time to time that he would be gone for a while.

Awakened Kim met him in the depths of the complex, looking just as plain and unassuming as yesterday. This time, however, she was wearing a dark suit of combat armor. The armor, in fact, gave June pause.

It was matte black and unembellished, looking neat, but entirely unremarkable at first glance. However, there was something about the armor that made him look again.

June had a good eye for these things, so he could not help but notice the subtle signs of sublime craftsmanship — how flawlessly the armor fit her figure, how well it maintained the balance between rigidity and flexibility, thus providing stellar defense while remaining relatively light and not at all cumbersome… the artistry of how seamlessly it incorporated subtle elements of modern design into the time-tested archaic framework.

Strangely enough, he could not identify the materials that had gone into crafting the armor. All he could tell was that they had come from Nightmare Creatures of the Corrupted Rank, and that there was an array of powerful enchantments hiding beneath the unassuming surface of the plain black armor.

It was, for all intents and purposes, a masterwork.

More than that, it was clearly custom-made as opposed to being bestowed by the Spell, which meant that Kim, a mere Awakened… was wearing a bespoke suit of Transcendent armor.

June glanced at her with a distant expression.

With her calm gaze, the mysterious woman looked quite comfortable and sharp in her black armor. She showed no sign of knowing — or caring — that she was wearing an entire fortune on her body.

Just who was Awakened Kim, really? What kind of funding did the nebulous force that had recruited him enjoy?

As she turned to meet his gaze, June finally noticed something that stood out on the plain black surface of the black armor. It was a circular insignia in the shape of a coiled serpent.

He studied the sharp-looking woman for a moment, then asked:

"Awakened Kim… if I may ask, where were you assigned in Antarctica?"

Was she a former member of the Special Reconnaissance Unit? Or maybe even one of the Irregulars companies, just like him?

No… if she had really met his grandfather, then she would have been in the Antarctic Center. And apart from Soul Reaper herself, barely anyone from the First Irregular Company had survived. Everyone in Antarctica had gone through hell, but those people were said to have met the Devil himself.

Awakened Kim shrugged.

"Oh. I was just a pencil pusher."

'Yeah... no way.'

Somehow, June strongly doubted it.

He did not press the issue, though. Instead, he pointed to the serpent insignia and raised an eyebrow.

"Is that the enchanter's signature?"

He was really curious to know which famous master had created this masterpiece.

Awakened Kim glanced at the insignia and sighed.

"Sort of. It's our… crest, I guess. Kind of defeats the purpose of being a secret organization, I know. But our boss and his foremost minion will not listen to my objections. Something about brand recognition and customer loyalty..."

Shaking her head with an aggrieved expression, she headed into the depths of the complex and gestured for him to follow. As they walked, June asked:

"Do I get to know who 'we' are now?"

Awakened Kim nodded.

"You will learn everything in the next few days. For now… know that we call ourselves the Shadow Clan. Our purpose is to perform delicate tasks that the Fire Keepers cannot undertake themselves. Gathering information, eliminating threats, dealing with special kinds of Nightmare Creatures. We are also responsible for establishing a secure base in a remote region of the Dream Realm, as well as for preparations against a potential hazard in the future."

June raised an eyebrow.

"What kind of hazard?"

Awakened Kim pursed her lips.

"I don't know. In fact, none of us know. That is because, as we were told, the nature of the hazard itself is such that simply knowing about it is dangerous."

He blinked a couple of times.

"How can we prepare to face a threat if we don't know what the threat is?"

She smiled faintly.

"By doing what our boss tells us. You'll understand when you meet him."

They reached the gate of a massive cargo elevator. Awakened Kim entered a security code, and the gate opened slowly — a few moments later, it lowered behind them, and the elevator started to move down.

June was surprised. They were already quite deep underground, but there seemed to be an even deeper layer to the government complex. He subconsciously timed the descent, calculating the depth.

Awakened Kim spoke by his side:

"The Shadow Clan is primarily based in the Dream Realm. You will be anchored at our Citadel — our work takes us all over the two worlds, though, so be prepared to travel a lot. Needless to say, it is preferable if no one notices our presence. In case contact with other humans is inevitable, though, you will be provided with a suitable cover identity."

June scratched the back of his head.

"Wouldn't it be problematic, to be anchored to a Citadel in a remote region of the Dream Realm if we need to travel a lot?"

She chuckled.

"Don't worry about it. Our boss can bring you to where you need to be. The Citadel itself can travel, as well."

So the mysterious boss was a Saint — only Saints could transport people between worlds, after all.

But more importantly…

'A Citadel that can travel?'

June suddenly had a suspicion.

'The Nameless Temple?'

The Citadel of the Lord of Shadows was known to be able to move. It had disappeared mysteriously a few days after the sinister man's death — people assumed that Lady Nephis bestowed it to one of her

Saints, but nobody knew for sure.

The Lord of Shadows… Shadow Clan…

June looked at Awakened Kim with suspicion.

No one knew where the Lord of Shadows had come from. Considering his great power and vast resources, though, there had to be some sort of faction standing behind him — it was simply unthinkable for a solitary Awakened to achieve all these feats alone.

The Lord of Shadows was dead now, having without a doubt left behind a masterless faction. People assumed that it had been quietly obliterated by the Ivory Tower, but what if Lady Nephis assumed control over its members instead?

That would explain a few things.

"How many members does our clan have?"

Awakened Kim looked at him calmly.

"Around two hundred. Half of us are operatives, the other half is involved in information gathering, logistics, and construction. Don't worry, though, most of us are friendly people. You'll fit right in, Corsair. Just… apart from the boss, you need to be wary of three individuals."

June tensed a little.

"They are?"

At the same time, he shook his head slightly, bewildered.

The elevator was still descending.

'Just how far down are we going?'

Awakened Kim spoke in a serious tone:

"First and foremost… our Mayor, Aiko. Also known as the Shadow Fairy. If she starts demanding rent money or charging you for mission

supplies, come find me. I can't guarantee that I can stop her, but I'll at least try to distract her."

June stared at Kim, trying to understand if she was joking.

Surely, she was…

But why was her tone so somber?

Meanwhile, she continued:

"Second is our princess, Rain. She's actually wonderful… but our boss might kill you if he catches you looking at her funny. And just so that you know, being killed by our boss is not an escape from suffering. It is merely the beginning…"

June coughed.

'Don't look at the princess funny. Got it.'

But what if she started looking at him funny?

June was not very self-absorbed, but he knew that he was quite a handsome man. Tall, cold, with black hair and blue eyes… he had been known to get a lot of attention from women. Which was actually a bit of a detriment in his profession.

So, June suddenly felt uneasy.

'Princess of Shadows… yeah, I'd better stay away.'

"Who's the third?"

Awakened Kim gave him a long look.

"The third is a man called Luster. If you hear him talk nonsense about the female members of our clan, come tell me immediately."

June's expression soured.

"Why? Does he have unsavory habits?"

He hated people like that.

Awakened Kim lingered for a bit, then suddenly let out a laugh.

"No… he's my husband. I'm going to give him hell at home."

June's calm and collected expression cracked for a moment.

At that moment, the elevator finally stopped.

The gates slowly opened, revealing a vast underground chamber.

The chamber was cylindrical in shape, the ceiling towering somewhere far, far above. June guessed that it used to be a water reservoir, now empty and repurposed for some other use.

The scale of the underground reservoir was still quite daunting.

However, he was in no mood to pay any attention to the size of the secret chamber.

Because at its center… something that should not have existed stood, towering at hundreds of meters in height.

It was a black rift in the fabric of reality, full of cold, impenetrable darkness.

At first, June tensed, assuming that it was a Nightmare Gate. However, he did not hear the maddening whispers of the Call…

Which meant that it had to be something entirely different.

It was a Dream Gate.

Chapter-2274: Dark Lord

…The dark fissure in the fabric of reality was a Dream Gate.

But a Dream Gate could not be hidden in an underground reservoir beneath the Central Government HQ. Because there was only one Supreme in the world, and only one Dream Gate… the radiant Dream Gate of Changing Star, the living goddess of humanity.

This Gate, however, was out of place. It brimmed with an impenetrable darkness, making June shiver as if chilled to the bone.

He was not someone to deny what he saw, however.

'A… second Dream Gate?'

If there was a second Dream Gate in the world… that meant that there was a second Supreme in the world, as well.

He almost staggered.

Awakened Kim patted June on the shoulder.

"Relax, Corsair. This secret is fully sanctioned by the Ivory Tower."

June gulped.

"B—but… the Lord of Shadows… he's dead. I saw him die with my own two eyes."

She smiled.

"Did you?"

With that, Awakened Kim left the elevator and entered the reservoir.

It was only then that June noticed that there were various cargo

containers placed chaotically here and there on the floor of the underground chamber, as well as several people busy unloading building materials and supplies from them.

"Kind of creepy, isn't it?"

He flinched, hearing a friendly voice speaking into his ear.

Turning around, June noticed a young man looking at him with an amiable smile. Quite disturbingly, he had not sensed the young man's approach at all.

It had been years since anyone had managed to sneak up on June. He still had scars from that near-fatal encounter.

The young man pointed to the Dream Gate.

"A creepy black portal hidden in a secret underground chamber… I nearly fainted the first time I saw it!"

June looked at the towering fissure once again, trying to regain his composure.

'The Lord of Shadows… is alive?'

Not only was the sinister fiend alive, he was also in charge of an elite clandestine force that supported the Ivory Tower from the shadows.

So… Lady Nephis and him had staged their fateful duel, for whatever reason.

June tried to come to terms with that fact.

Somehow, it made a comforting sort of sense.

One Supreme was like a radiant sun, shining upon mankind from the heavens. The other was like a vast shadow hiding in the eternal darkness deep underground. Both were working hand in hand to protect humanity…

The goddess and her shadow.

June exhaled slowly, then froze.

'Wait… that's "our boss" Awakened Kim kept talking about?!'

He suddenly felt dizzy.

Who went around calling a Supreme "boss"?! Wasn't… wasn't that sacrilege?

The young man turned to Awakened Kim and saluted her respectfully. She smiled.

"Oh, Ray… are you and Fleur back from the Eastern Quadrant?"

He nodded.

"I am, but she stayed behind to treat the civilians. Oh, by the way, will Master Quentin be returning any time soon? She wanted to thank him for his guidance."

Awakened Kim shook her head.

"You know that he mainly stays in Bastion. Now that our princess is there as well, he won't be back for some time."

The young man — Ray — sighed.

"I don't get it… I really don't. When I first learned that Rani — I mean, Rain — was royalty, I was honestly a bit envious. But she went straight back to a road crew after the war! And now she's delivering coffee in Bastion. Isn't our boss a little too ruthless to his sister?"

It was only then that June noticed Ray wearing a suit of black armor similar to that of Awakened Kim.

Everyone in the underground chamber was, in fact, all emblazoned with the coiling serpent insignia.

That suddenly made his heart flutter.

'Does this mean that I'll get one, too?'

Would he be getting a bespoke suit of Transcendent armor?

'She did say that our benefits were stellar…'

Awakened Kim, meanwhile, pointed to June and said neutrally:

"This is our new recruit, Corsair. Corsair, this is our best stealth specialist, Ray. Be nice to him… his girlfriend is a healer."

June looked at the young man and smiled.

"Let's be friends."

Anyone who knew anything understood that befriending healers was a matter of first priority.

After saying their goodbye to Ray, June and Kim walked past the cargo containers and passed through the Dream Gate without much fanfare. June had been wondering what he would encounter on the other side with a bit of trepidation, but to his surprise, he saw…

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing. He was surrounded by impenetrable darkness, the kind one rarely encountered in a world that was full of stars, moons, and city lights.

All June could feel was the wind on his face, hinting that he was not underground anymore. He could also hear various sounds reaching his ears from a distance.

Awakened Kim was somewhere near. Her voice reached him from a few meters away a moment later:

"You will receive the Mark soon. For now, I will use my Aspect Ability on you. It will help you see."

Then, suddenly…

June could see again.

The darkness did not disappear, but he was somehow able to see through it clearly. The world was devoid of color, but other than that, it was as if he suddenly received perfect night vision.

A vast starless sky was above him.

All around him…

Were the crumbled, dilapidated buildings of a dark, ancient city.

He was standing in the middle of a spacious square that rested under the black branches of a colossal tree. The Dream Gate towered behind him, while a wide road led into the depths of the city in front of him.

Awakened Kim spoke calmly:

"This is Saint Square. Apparently, this is where our boss met Saint for the first time…"

June hesitated to ask.

"Which Saint?"

She shook her head.

"Not a Saint. The Saint — the Onyx Saint. She is the general of Shadow Legion… as well as the combat instructor of the Shadow Clan. She'll be training you, too."

He trembled.

'Wait… she doesn't mean… that terrifying living statue?'

June was actually quite familiar with the Lord of Shadows and his infernal servants, having followed the sellsword Saint into battle during the conquest expedition of the Vanishing Lake.

The graceful onyx knight, the towering steel fiend, and the shapeshifting serpent…

Weren't they simple Echoes?

Apparently, they weren't. And one of them would be training him soon.

He sighed.

"I'm… looking forward to it."

Awakened Kim nodded.

"First, you will need to meet the boss and receive the Mark. We'll settle you in the Dark Castle after that."

June raised an eyebrow.

"The Dark Castle?"

Instead of answering, Kim simply pointed.

Turning around, June looked up and froze for a few moments.

Out there, standing on a tall hill above the city, was a sinister castle built of black stone.

It was grand and magnificent, with dozens of towers rising into the air, each supported by a number of elaborate arches and columns. Grotesque gargoyles were staring down on the ruins from under the eaves.

A grandiose staircase led to the castle gates. In front of it, there was a vast stone platform, meant to serve as the gathering ground for the soldiers in case the enemy was to somehow scale the hill.

Now, however, a beautiful temple of black marble was perched on it instead.

The Nameless Temple…

It was at this point that June finally asked:

"I am sorry, Awakened Kim… but where, exactly, are we?"

She looked at him in confusion, then smiled faintly.

"Where else? This is the Forgotten Shore."

June inhaled sharply.

The Forgotten Shore! The nightmarish crucible where Song of the

Fallen, Raised by Wolves, Nightingale, the Fire Keepers… and Changing Star herself had been forged.

The cradle of humanity's goddess.

A subtle frown creased his brow.

"Wait… but wasn't there a Bright Castle here, ruled by a Bright Lord?"

Awakened Kim laughed quietly.

"There was. Now, however, we have a Dark Castle… ruled by a Dark Lord."

June blinked a couple of times.

"That's a little on the nose, isn't it?"

She coughed.

"Oh... it is. Don't say it to the boss's face, though. Granted, he probably heard you already — he hears everything, after all."

June paled.

"What I meant to say was that it is… beautifully poetic and highly symbolic. Yeah."

Kim looked at him with a hint of disdain and shook her head.

"In any case, let's go. I need to get back to NQSC soon."

They walked across the Dark City together as she explained a few more things. June was a little bit distracted, however, by the sight of countless harrowing Nightmare Creatures — or rather, their silent shadows — moving along the desolate streets, clearing them of stone debris or transporting building materials.

It seemed like the entire city was being slowly restored to its former glory.

At some point, they passed a magnificent ruined cathedral. Rhythmic

sounds of a hammer striking an anvil could be heard from the inside, ringing far and wide in the silence of the desolate city.

June looked at it with curiosity.

"What is happening there?"

Awakened Kim glanced at the cathedral and frowned slightly.

"There... our blacksmith is there, working endlessly to arm the members of the Shadow Legion. He is a shadow, just like the rest of them."

June thought he heard a reverent note in her voice, but wasn't sure what it meant.

Finally, they ascended the tall hill and stopped. The Nameless Temple was to their right, while the towering gates of the Dark Castle were in front of them.

Looking at the dark chasm, June couldn't help but shiver.

"You know, Awakened Kim… looking at this gate, I can't help but feel like it is the maw of a giant, insatiable beast."

She gave him a strange look, then headed toward the gate with a nonchalant shrug.

"Well, that is because it is. This entire castle is one giant Transcendent Devil."

June chuckled.

'This Awakened Kim… she really has a strange sense of humor.'

"You're joking, right?"

The unassuming woman entered the castle without responding.

June hesitated in front of the gates for a few moments.

"...Right?"

Chapter-2275: Shadow Boss

The insides of the Transcendent Devil… were strangely no different from the interior of an actual castle. The place did not even seem haunted or especially sinister — in fact, it was clean and neat, almost cozy. Of course, that was only because Awakened Kim had granted June the ability to see through the darkness that drowned the spacious corridors.

He would not have wanted to wander them alone while carrying something as unreliable as a lantern.

Overall, everything he had seen so far — the abyssal chasm of the hidden Dream Gate, the crumbling city resting under the dark expanse of a starless sky, the silent shadows populating its ancient streets, the black edifice of the magnificent temple, the towering black castle that possessed a malevolent life of its own — was more than worthy of being the domain of a dark deity.

And June was about to meet that deity.

Of course, he knew that Supremes were not really gods. However, from the point of view of a mundane human… or a mere Awakened, for that matter… they might as well have been. The King of Swords and the Queen of Worms had mostly kept their power hidden, but the Lady of the Ivory Tower was far more generous with her grace.

She was rarely seen, but there was hardly a person in the world who had not felt the presence of her radiant power. Those of them who had fought in that fateful last battle of the Realm War knew how miraculous it was especially well.

The power to nurture, the power to destroy…

June had no doubt that, if Changing Star wanted to, she could annihilate the entire world in the incandescent inferno of her flames.

She could also embrace all of humanity and carry them all to salvation.

If that was not a god, then he did not know what was.

The Lord of Shadows was a comparable existence. So…

June, who more or less had ice flowing through his veins, found himself struggling to remain calm. His composure was crumbling with each step he took.

'It's… it's going to be alright. After all, I've already met the Lord of Shadows. Right?'

Out there in Godgrave, he had seen the fearsome Saint many times. Granted, June had been creeped out by him even then.

Who wouldn't be?

That fearsome black armor, the sinister mask, the cold and insidious presence, the oppressive force of his chilling killing intent… the frightening mystery of it all...

The thought of looking directly at that monstrous mask made June shiver.

People had speculated that there was something inhuman hiding behind it even when the Lord of Shadow was merely a Saint. No one had ever seen him bleed, after all.

He was not a Saint anymore.

How much more frightening had he become after attaining Supremacy?

"Penny for your thoughts."

June flinched slightly and looked at Awakened Kim. He hesitated for a few moments, then said:

"I'm a bit nervous to meet my new employer, to be honest."

She smiled faintly.

"I was, too, the first time I met him."

He raised an eyebrow.

"If I may ask, what is he like?"

Awakened Kim remained silent for a bit, then said with a neutral expression:

"Well… his waffles are to die for."

The corner of June's eye twitched.

'What in the world…'

What did she mean?!

Before he could continue the conversation, though, they reached tall wooden gates. The heavy doors opened by themselves, and Awakened Kim ushered him into the throne room of the Dark Castle.

The great hall was grandiose and majestic in appearance, its vast expanse drowning in impenetrable darkness. The walls were decorated with intricate carvings that spanned dozens of meters like a regal tapestry, depicting scenes of fearsome battles and fantastical landscapes. At the far end of the hall, a set of stairs led to a dark alcove. And there, on a raised dais, stood a black throne.

Sitting on that throne…

June stumbled, momentarily stunned.

All this time, he had been mentally preparing himself to face the Lord of Shadows — the fearsome figure encased in an intricate suit of dark armor, wearing an eerie mask that depicted the face of a snarling demon, with long white hair cascading down its back.

Reality, however, was very different from his imagination.

Instead of the familiar, if deeply frightening, visage of the Lord of

Shadows… a slender young man was sitting on the throne in a relaxed pose, wearing a simple black tunic.

The young man had skin as pale as flawless white jade, silky black hair, and eyes that were like two onyx gems. His delicate beauty was almost sublime, making June feel like he was looking at a piece of art, not a human being.

What was more, he could not sense the cold indifference, disdainful arrogance, and chilling bloodthirst that people had associated with the Lord of Shadows. Instead, he felt… nothing at all, as if the young man had no presence whatsoever.

'No, wait…'

This… this was the Lord of Shadows?

The Lord of Shadows was this young?

More importantly…

He had been hiding this face behind a mask all this time?!

June was stunned.

He was dazed.

But only for a moment. When the moment passed, June realized that he had been staring at the Shadow Sovereign with wide eyes. But even knowing that, he still had to force himself to look away.

'Stop ogling your boss, fool!'

At the moment, June wanted nothing more than to find the bastard who had said that the Lord of Shadows was constantly wearing the mask due to being horribly disfigured, and drown him in a puddle.

The silly rumors that the mysterious Saint and Lady Nephis had been lovers… suddenly did not seem that silly anymore.

In fact, they made too much sense.

"Boss."

Awakened Kim bowed slightly.

The Lord of Shadows looked at her and smiled.

His smile was beautiful enough to stop hearts, but sadly enough, Kim seemed to be immune to it, while June was not in the mood to appreciate beauty. In any case, he was quite scared.

"Ah, Kimmy. Is this the new recruit?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Only one from the latest batch passed the selection."

The Lord of Shadows shifted his gaze and looked at June.

Surprisingly enough, his gaze wasn't terrifying, suffocating, or oppressive.

It was quite friendly…

Which only made June tense up more.

After all, people in his field of work knew that there was nothing more dangerous than a being that was supposed to be threatening, but did not feel like a threat at all.

The Lord of Shadows slowly raised a hand…

'What… what is he going to do?!'

…and waved at June lazily.

"You must be Corsair! Welcome, welcome… wow, your dossier? Damnation! You are so cool."

June froze.

"E—excuse me?"

The Lord of Shadows shook his head dejectedly.

"The black market, huh? Why didn't I think of that? More importantly… why didn't Aiko think of that? I should seriously deduct her pay…"

June blinked a couple of times.

'Huh?'

And that…

Was how he met his new boss, the Dark Lord, for the first time.

Chapter-2276: Warm Awakening

Sunny woke up from the warm touch of sunshine on his bare chest. Sunlight was pouring through the curtains, the white fabric murmuring quietly as the gentle wind made it stream and flutter.

He remained motionless for a while, basking in the warmth and the softness of the bed. It was truly one of life's greatest joys, to wake up with a smile on his face.

A few moments later, he turned his head and looked at Nephis, who was sleeping peacefully by his side. Her silver hair was scattered across the pillow, and her beautiful face was blissfully calm and endearingly vulnerable as she slept.

He enjoyed the view for a few minutes, not in a hurry to wake her up.

Opening the Dream Gate for the Night Garden had taken a lot out of her yesterday. So, she deserved some rest.

He would have loved to share the burden of yesterday's undertaking, but sadly, that was something only Nephis could have done.

Both of them could accomplish unique feats while opening Dream Gates. Sunny, for example, was capable of opening seven of them instead of one. Meanwhile, Nephis could open a Dream Gate that allowed passage in both directions.

Nightmare Gates led from the Dream Realm into the waking world, while Dream Gates led from the waking world into the Dream Realm. However, Nephis was a Dreamspawn — a being existing on the edge between nightmare and reality, and therefore belonging to both worlds — and perhaps because of that, her Dream Gate was special.

That was why only she could have sent the Night Garden to Earth.

As Sunny wondered what would happen to her power when the two worlds completely fused, Nephis stirred and opened her striking grey eyes.

Sunlight reflected in them, making her pupils spark.

She turned her head sleepily and looked up at Sunny, then smiled.

"...Were you staring at me again?"

He nodded shamelessly.

"Absolutely. Why wouldn't I stare at the most beautiful woman in the world?"

Nephis lingered for a moment, then scoffed and pushed his face away. Sunny laughed, surrendering to her gentle push…

He did not fail to notice the slight blush appearing on her cheeks, though.

Rising from the bed, Nephis summoned a light tunic from a storm of radiant sparks and raised her hands above her head, stretching with a satisfied sigh. Sunny climbed out of bed, as well, manifesting simple clothes from the shadows.

The uppermost chamber of the Ivory Tower was spacious and permeated with golden light, but where there was light, there were also shadows — so, he never had trouble summoning them to do his bidding.

That said…

Sunny appreciated Neph's graceful figure for a few moments, then said in a pleasant tone:

"I just had a brilliant idea. How about… we climb back into bed?"

He did not really need to say anything, really, because she could sense his desire.

Nephis looked at him scornfully over the shoulder.

"Unlike you, I only have one body."

Sunny tilted his head.

What was that supposed to mean?

Was she… was she hinting that he had worn her down last night?

But she was capable of recovering from any strain in moments. Her single body was literally inexhaustible…

Had he exhausted the inexhaustible?

Sunny was suddenly torn between pride and disappointment.

At that moment, Nephis frowned slightly and threw a pillow at him.

"I meant that I can only be in one place at a time! I'm already late to a meeting with Effie… erase whatever lewd thoughts you're thinking from that dirty head of yours, scoundrel!"

Sunny allowed the pillow to hit him in the face and smiled innocently.

"Welp. I guess I have a grudge against Effie now…"

Nephis stared at him sternly for a few moments.

He could see that she was suppressing a smile, though.

Eventually, she shook her head.

"I need to get ready…"

Soon enough, Nephis left her living quarters and descended the steps of the Ivory Tower. Sunny, of course, was hiding in her shadow by then — that was where this incarnation of his spent most of its time while his other avatars were busy with their own tasks.

That way, he could both stay close to Nephis and be aware of all important developments happening on her side without having to use Cassie as a messenger. If there was one unfortunate side to this situation, though, it was that Sunny could not be with her in his

human form all the time.

After all, he was officially dead.

…It was alright to appear in front of the people who knew the truth, at least.

Effie was waiting in a parlor on one of the lower levels of the Ivory Tower, enjoying the plentiful tray of snacks. Hearing Nephis approach, she smiled and waved a hand.

"Damn, Princess. These are to die for… who's your chef? Please tell me. I am definitely not going to steal them!"

Then, she frowned for a moment and then looked at Nephis with a mischievous smile.

"Oh, I guess I can't call you Princess anymore. Our Princess is more of an Empress now. Ah... they grow up so fast…"

Nephis smiled faintly and sat down opposite Effie, the wide desk separating them.

"Sunny made the snacks."

Effie froze.

The vivacious huntress had been affected perhaps the most by the revelation that the menacing Lord of Shadows was, in fact, none other than charming Master Sunless.

Sunny still could not help but laugh wickedly every time he remembered the array of mortified expressions that had flashed across her face at that moment.

From stunned silence, to the slow realization that it was the sinister Saint who had been pampering her son with ice cream, to a sudden horror at the memory of slandering him in front of Nephis to win points for the delicate, gallant enchanter…

And so much more.

No, really, it was a priceless memory for Sunny now. So priceless, in fact, that he generously forgave half of the times Effie had forced him to listen to the talk about the birds and the bees on Alethea's island.

In any case, she had been acting uncharacteristically subdued and borderline meek around him ever since.

Now, too, Effie grew tense at the mention of his name.

She cleared her throat.

"Right. About him. Listen, Princess, I know that you are a big girl now, but…"

Effie froze for a moment, then asked cautiously:

"He's not behind me, is he?"

Nephis looked at her in confusion.

"No…"

Effie instantly turned into her usual lively self:

"That guy! The Lord of Shadows! I know that he is stupidly hot, rich, charming, powerful, and stupidly hot, as well as an amazing cook who is also great with his hands… wait, did I say hot twice? Whatever! What I mean to say is that there's plenty of fish in the sea. You should find yourself a kind and honest man instead of settling for the first random Supreme you met on the street!"

But Nephis was not done talking.

"...Technically, he's under the desk."

Effie froze.

Sunny chose that exact moment to assume his human form and sit down on a chair next to Nephis.

He smiled pleasantly at Effie, remained silent for a moment, and then said in a pleasant tone:

"Yes, you did say hot twice."

She let out a groan.

Chapter-2277: This Ain't No Hymn

Eventually, Effie gave Sunny a glare and grumbled:

"I liked you more when you were Master Sunless…"

He chuckled.

"I am still the same man, though."

She sighed and leaned back, picking up a pastry from the tray.

"Well, yeah! But you are also a powerful Supreme who goes around beheading Sovereigns…"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, then shrugged nonchalantly.

"You are the world's sweetest mom, but also a Transcendent powerhouse who goes around tearing Great Nightmare Creatures apart with bare hands. A person can be more than one thing."

Effie swallowed the pastry and gave him a satisfied look.

Then, her eyes gleamed dangerously.

"More than one thing, you say? That reminds me… Princess, does he ever…"

Luckily, whatever she wanted to say was interrupted by the sound of the door opening. Cassie entered the parlor, carrying a stack of documents with her.

"Oh, you are all already here. Let us start — Nephis has to move on to the next item on her schedule in thirty-four minutes."

With that, their brief meeting began. As the Supreme ruler of humanity, Nephis was endlessly busy — if she was not on the battlefield, she was usually drowned in an endless parade of strategy meetings and discussions. Every day, she had to make countless decisions, many of them having the potential to affect the very future of mankind.

Of course, the benefit of being the highest authority in the world was that there were vast resources at her disposal — human resources, most of all. Humanity's best and brightest were ready to answer her call, advise her on the best course of action, and take various tasks off her hands. In fact, with Cassie's help, Nephis had built a greatly efficient pyramid of delegation.

The great apparatus of the Human Domain worked as a well-oiled machine.

The most precious resource in the world was talent, and there were countless talented individuals working together to accomplish the goals she set. Still… even that was not enough. So, one of the most important priorities of the new regime was to seek and nurture talent.

Administrative talent, scientific talent, engineering talent… all kinds of people were recruited and given ample opportunities to realize their varied talents, as well as grow.

But most of all, of course, what Nephis wanted was to nurture strength.

Humanity needed warriors more than it needed anyone else, after all.

So, everyone was encouraged to grow stronger. Awakened were encouraged to become Masters, Masters were encouraged to become Saints. Saints were encouraged to reach the very peak of their potential, or even challenge the Fourth Nightmare if they wished — not that anyone had, yet. As a result, the number of champions of all Ranks had been swiftly growing in the last year.

The fact that countless inexperienced Awakened had returned from Godgrave as seasoned veterans was helping greatly, too.

…And, of course, mundane people were encouraged to become Awakened.

Now that people were migrating to the Dream Realm en masse, the nature of Awakening had transformed. Before, only those chosen by the Spell could challenge the First Nightmare — but now, anyone who passed through the Dream Gate could. All they had to do was request it.

They did not even need to return to the waking world with the help of a Saint or leave the boundary of Neph's Domain. All they needed to do was wish for it sincerely in their hearts.

Sensing their strong desire to challenge a Nightmare, Nephis could release them from the protection of her Domain.

Strangely enough, people tended to do it communally. The places where they gathered to prove their longing were solemn and quiet, with people meditating in silence for hours, or sometimes even days… to Sunny, they looked similar to believers kneeling in a temple to pray.

It was quite eerie, actually, to see how readily people forgot that Nephis, too, was a person, and treated her as some kind of goddess instead. He knew for a fact that this strange development had nothing to do with what Nephis and Cassie themselves wanted.

If anything, they wanted the opposite, since believing in a benevolent deity would eventually instill people with a subconscious belief that they would be saved — instead of inspiring them to seek enough strength to save themselves.

What Nephis wanted was to become someone whom people believed they could become, not a heavenly existence that was forever out of reach.

…In any case, there were more and more mundane humans Awakening every month. They did not have to wait for the winter solstice anymore — passing through the Dream Gate and anchoring them to a Citadel was enough to become an Awakened, even if some still chose to pass the second trial of the Spell without any help.

There were unintended consequences to that new reality, as well. For one, the Awakened Academy had to change and open its doors to mundane youths for the first time since its establishment. Since anyone could become a Sleeper as long as they willed it, withholding the best education from the aspiring youths had no point.

Another side effect was far more somber.

People were encouraged to become stronger, but not forced to. Still, there were more and more mundane people challenging the First Nightmare, more and more Awakened challenging the Second, and more and more Masters challenging the Third. The number of human warriors of the Awakened, Ascended, and Transcendent Ranks was swelling…

But not all the challengers survived. In fact, for every one who succeeded, there were several who did not.

The grim harvest of lives the Nightmare Spell collected was more plentiful than it had ever been, with the exception perhaps of the first days of its descent.

At the same time, there were more Nightmare Gates opening in the waking world, and more youths being infected by the Nightmare Spell naturally every day.

Sadly, there was little Nephis could do about the latter even if she wanted to. The Sword Domain and the Song Domain had stood on a foundation built by the Nightmare Spell — the Citadels. Her Domain, however, had no boundary, existing in the hearts of those who were inspired by her.

It spanned both worlds… but Nephis and Sunny swiftly found out that the suppressing effect Domains seemed to have on the tiny seeds of Corruption hiding in the hearts of Aspirants was not, in fact, an expression of a Sovereign's power.

Instead, it was a function built into the Citadels by the Spell, just like Nightmares themselves were a function of the Spell that gave humans a chance to destroy the Seeds before they blossomed.

So, only those followers of Nephis who lived in the area of influence of her Citadels could escape the First Nightmare.

That was why the population of the Night Garden could cross over to Earth and be spared the deadly trial, but the infected youths of the waking world could not rely on their goddess to save them from having to face it.

All they could do was pass through the Dream Gate to postpone their Nightmares, if they wished to do so... and had enough time to flee.

In the end…

Humanity was reinvigorated and inspired to strive for greater heights.

However, there was still a mountain of broken dreams hiding in the shadow of its rise from the ruins of a crumbling world.

Chapter-2278: Field Reports

Sunny had little to do with most affairs discussed this morning, so he only listened to the meeting half-heartedly.

Cassie was delivering a concise report on various issues.

"...I received the initial status update from the Night Garden. It is indeed being somewhat suppressed by the laws of the waking world, but not outside of our expectations. Jet managed to get it under control with relatively little trouble, so she proceeded along the planned course. Their speed is greatly diminished, though. Clearing the Northeastern Corridor and reaching Australia will take them no less than a week. What is more, the vessel seems incapable of replenishing its fuel — whatever it might be — in the waking world. They will have to return to the Dream Realm before the end of the month, at least for a few days."

"The agricultural research in Ravenheart is proceeding smoothly. Saint Bliss has requested additional reinforcements stationed at the laboratory in case of an unexpected containment breach — Helie is there at the moment, so I asked her to stick around. It should be fine, but the seismic readings coming from the depths of the volcano are somewhat concerning. We know that a powerful Nightmare Creature emerged from it once in the past… Kai is monitoring the situation and will let us know if there is a real threat. Hopefully, we can deal with whatever comes before an earthquake or an eruption happens."

"Oh, and I'm not sure if you noticed, but last night, the test run of the Rivergate Facility finally succeeded. People all over the city are celebrating. Nephis, you'll need to congratulate Chief Bethany personally… I scheduled it for tomorrow."

Sunny smiled faintly.

So, Beth had finally fulfilled her bold promise. He was glad.

'Wait, last night?'

How did he miss the entire city glowing with electric lights?

In any case, Rain would probably be sleep-deprived when she visited the Ivory Tower today…

Effie reported on a few issues next. Most of them had to do with the development of the Citadels east of Godgrave, but there were a few interesting pieces of news, as well.

"Both eastern subjugation campaigns are proceeding smoothly. We are cleansing the interior of the Domain at a good pace. The progress is especially great on the Chained Isles. Tyris and Roan have also come up with measures to prevent more islands from falling into the Sky Below — something about pulling the Ebony Tower up from the depths and using it as an anchor. And just so you know, it took all my willpower to hold back the joke about plugging a huge rift with a… ah, never mind! In any case, the exploration teams surveying the territories in the far east have not discovered any new Citadels after those first two… from what they report, we might reach the edge of the landmass in the next few months. We'll move north from there along the coast."

"The situation in the Eastern Quadrant is still dire. Skinwalker, that damn thing… it's learning faster than we are coming up with countermeasures. There were three outbreaks in the last week — the casualties are not as numerous as before the latest security protocols were put in place, but our Saints are growing tired. We need to rotate them more often now. The cohort that had conquered the Third Nightmare last month improved the situation somewhat, but just barely. In addition, Skinwalker seems to be growing stronger. I'm afraid he is nearing an evolution. If that was not bad enough, a Category Four Gate opened in the Western Quadrant last night. I'll be going personally, but before that, we'll need to redeploy the Wolves from Australia. Princess… I will be counting on you for that."

Due to the unique quality of Neph's Dream Gate, it could serve as a means of rapidly shifting troops across the waking world. All they had to do was enter the Dream Realm through the Gate, then leave through it once Nephis repositioned its entrance. Therefore, Bastion

had become a transit point for countless soldiers.

Of course, only Awakened could use that method, since mundane soldiers would be thrust into the First Nightmare as soon as they returned to the waking world from the Dream Realm.

Nephis nodded.

"As long as the Dream Gate schedule is adjusted properly, there should be no problem."

They continued to discuss various matters having to do with logistics and countless fires that needed to be put down across the two worlds.

Soon enough, Sunny grew a little bored…

Or rather, he grew a little lost.

It was happening to him from time to time these days, in the moments when his concentration waned. The sensory input he was receiving from the countless shadows serving him overwhelmed his sense of self like a sea, making it hard to remember that he was human.

Of course… he wasn't really a human anymore. Even though Sunny drew a line between himself and the shadows, in truth, he was no more than a shadow himself.

Even if that shadow was a divine one.

Things were even worse for Nephis. Not only was she enduring the weight of three billion souls, but she was also acting as a guardian angel… no, Eurys told him not to use that word… a guardian deity for the warriors of humanity battling the Nightmare Creatures across two worlds. Even if her powers struggled to reach Earth, she still persisted.

Which meant that she was almost constantly using her Aspect, and therefore almost constantly experiencing excruciating pain.

That was the price people worshiping Nephis did not know she was paying to be the shining beacon of hope for them.

If there was one silver lining to it all… it was that she was not prone to losing her own humanity in the process anymore. That was because of Sunny's help, Neph's own efforts to ground herself in all things human, and the strange connection she was sharing with countless people and their human desires.

'Still… I hate it.'

He did not like the self-sacrificial nature of Neph's effort, whether people saw her as a messiah or not.

"...And what about you? Don't you have anything to report?"

Hearing Effie address him in a teasing tone, he belatedly turned to her and scratched the edge of his nose.

"Oh… well. I'm still busy up north, in the Burned Forest. The information network of the Shadow Clan is spreading, but there is still no sign of Mordret. My people are monitoring the known Category Four Gates, though — oh, right. I'll need to send someone to Western Quadrant now. And things have settled down on the Forgotten Shore, so I won't need to pay it as much attention anymore. I'm thinking of heading to Ravenheart."

Effie raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"Ravenheart? What did you forget there?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then smiled faintly.

"Let's just say that it's a... a piece of my inheritance."

Chapter-2279: Damned if You Don't

Sunny found himself in his current predicament due to Weaver's lineage — the forbidden inheritance of the nebulous daemon that Anvil had described as an abominable curse. Because of it, he had to hide himself from the world and avoid gaining attention.

However… since he was already cursed, it would be foolish not to take full advantage of the nebulous daemon's tainted inheritance.

Having more of it than he possessed already would not make any difference. Additionally, it was not like Sunny had to disappear without a trace and spend the rest of his life alone in obscurity — the daemons themselves were known to countless humans, after all.

It was just that they had been mysterious and distant. Additionally, they existed in the shadow cast by the gods, other creatures of the Divine Rank, and Unholy horrors — the Seven Demons had not stood out too much in the crowd of mythical beings. It was only when Hope descended to a mortal realm and got close to humans that the real trouble had ensued.

The problem was that humanity only had three Supremes now, with no one above them. So, if Sunny were to reveal himself, he would gain far more attention than even Hope had attained.

In any case, he had already found three of the seven pieces of the Forbidden Lineage — Blood Weave, Bone Weave, and Soul Weave. Each had made him far more powerful, saving his life on countless occasions…

Four pieces remained.

These four pieces had been on his mind ever since he read the runes

that Nether, the Demon of Destiny, left on the walls of the Ebony Tower.

Sunny remembered them often:

[Gods created all living creatures, but not all creatures they created carry a divine lineage. Only those born of the gods do, and those born of their descendants. Why have the gods forbidden us seven to sire offspring? Why are we destined for loneliness? Is it because we are of the Forgotten One, who slumbers in the Void?]

Now, Sunny had the answer. It was strange to realize that he knew something that even the daemons had not known, at some point in the ancient past. Of course, Nether had been harboring a suspicion about the truth even back then, already… and the Demon of Fate had to have known all about it.

After all, the next part of the inscription was about Weaver.

[Where is the Void, and where is its Gate? How did Weaver enter it, and what did Weaver see? Why did Weaver decide to break the will of the gods and create a lineage?]

Sunny was just as clueless about Weaver's goals and motivations as their siblings had been. What he did know, however, was that Weaver had scattered seven pieces of his forbidden lineage across the tapestry of fate, leaving them to be found in the distant future.

[Blood, bone, flesh. Soul, spirit, mind. And shadow…

A piece is lost to fantasy, a piece is lost to fear. A piece is lost to respite, a piece is lost to darkness. A piece is lost to sorrow, a piece is lost to rot. And finally, a piece is stolen by a thief.]

Sunny had found the piece stolen by the Vile Thieving Bird, Blood Weave, on the Forgotten Shore. He found the piece lost to the rot of Corruption, Bone Weave, in the Ebony Tower. He also found the piece lost to sorrow, Soul Weave, in the Nightmare version of the Tomb of Ariel… near the final resting place of Oblivion.

Flesh, spirit, mind, and shadow remained.

He was confident that the first three were hidden somewhere in the three Great Citadels left behind by the Demon of Dread, the Demon of Repose, and the Demon of Imagination — Ravenheart, Night Garden, and Bastion.

The fourth one… the fourth one seemed to have been found by Broken Sword, becoming his doom. Therefore, it was somewhere in the Underworld, near Broken Sword's remains.

Now that the initial chaos of becoming the rulers of humanity had been somewhat dealt with, and various tasks Sunny had to perform were on track, he could finally spare an incarnation or two to begin his search for the lost pieces of Weaver's lineage once more.

Underworld was full of true darkness, and therefore a natural foil to Sunny's power — so, he was considering venturing there last.

On the other hand, the mirror maze under True Bastion seemed even more eerie. After all, Sunny knew a lot about true darkness by now… but he still knew too little about the Others.

He was of the mind to start from Ravenheart or the Night Garden. The latter was currently in the waking world, which made the choice easy — Sunny had to start from Ravenheart… the Jade Palace built by the Demon of Dread.

And when he collected all remaining pieces of his lineage…

Then, he would be ready to return to the Tomb of Ariel.

While Sunny was considering all that, Effie stared at him with a dubious expression.

"Inheritance? Aren't you already loaded, Shadow Boy? Who would leave you an inheritance, anyway?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'S—shadow Boy? That's a new one.'

He frowned.

"Listen… I am not a boy. First of all, I am a full-blown man. Secondly, I am a Supreme — a literal king."

Effie narrowed her eyes and looked him over.

"…You're still a shorty, though."

Sunny's eyes twitched.

He glared at her for a few moments, then inhaled deeply and looked away.

'Wicked beanpole!'

It was not like he couldn't change his height if he wanted to. He was a shadow now, and shadows were inherently formless. So, he could assume whatever form he wanted, short or tall.

His original appearance simply felt the most natural. Plus, he liked himself the way he was — his own form was great. It was awesome!

Oh, and Nephis liked it quite a lot, too…

And although Effie would die denying it, so did she!

Sunny smiled pleasantly, the pain of his Flaw reminding him that he had not answered her initial question.

"Yeah, I'm loaded. As for who would leave me an inheritance — let me tell you, gods and demons competed to make me their heir. Actually, pieces of my inheritance are scattered all over the world… one is Ravenheart, but another one is right here in Bastion."

His smile widened a little.

"So, you and I will spend some quality time together soon, too…"

In the next moment, his smile faltered, and Sunny flinched a little.

That was because Nephis kicked him under the table.

'What… what was that for?!'

Looking just as impassive as usual, Nephis said in an even tone:

"I think what he meant to say was that his exploration would lead him to Bastion in the near future. Your support would be appreciated, Effie."

Effie looked at her, then at Sunny, then back to Nephis.

Eventually, she smiled.

"Why, of course. I am nothing but a proponent of responsible exploration…"

At that moment, Cassie cleared her throat.

"Can we get back to discussing matters on the agenda, please? Since Sunny will be visiting Ravenheart, the volcano issue can be put to rest. However, that still leaves us with…"

As the discussion resumed, Sunny found himself getting bored again.

So, using the chance, he decided to shift his attention and concentrate on what his other incarnations were doing.

Chapter-2280: Hidden Dagger

Now that his original body was no more, Sunny's existence was split between seven incarnations. He could maintain all seven avatars indefinitely or release control of some, returning control to his shadows.

One incarnation remained in Bastion, accompanying Nephis and keeping an eye on Rain. It also served as a point of contact between Sunny and the Ivory Tower, allowing the public and the clandestine forces of the Human Domain to coordinate their actions better.

'Human Domain…'

As far as Sunny was concerned, it was a name that lacked necessary gravitas — and he was a known authority on giving things great names. No one had listened to him on this issue, though, for some reason.

In the beginning, people used to call Neph's Domain all kinds of things — the Star Domain, the Light Domain, the Immortal Flame Domain… however, Nephis had consciously chosen to renounce these names in favor of a more general title, separating the identity of the new human empire from her own.

Names held power, after all.

More importantly, she was looking toward the future. In the future, more human Sovereigns would emerge, while Nephis herself could ascend to a higher Rank… or perish while trying to. The human unity she and Sunny had won in Godgrave had to be able to withstand their absence.

In any case, while one of Sunny's incarnations was hiding in the very heart of the Human Domain, the rest of them were far away, on the Forgotten Shore.

His main avatar was playing the role of the Dark Lord, residing in the gloomy throne room of the Marvellous Mimic. He controlled the shades working on the restoration of the city and dealt with issues having to do with the Shadow Clan.

The Shadow Clan… was a force made up of exceptional elites, each possessing an array of rare talents.

For example, there was Corsair, their newest recruit. He had a service record that would make most people faint — a good reminder that while Sunny and the members of his cohort had been having their harrowing adventures, countless outstanding people all over the world had been living their own storied lives in the dreadful reality of the Nightmare Spell as well.

Despite how exceptional Corsair was, however, he was not an outlier among the members of the Shadow Clan. Most of them had a dossier as thick and as unbelievable as his.

Sunny had chosen each and every one of them himself, after all.

Despite that, the overall power of the Shadow Clan was not that great — not in comparison to the renowned Awakened forces like the Fire Keepers, the Wolf Army, the Nightsingers, and so on at least. Most of its members were merely Awakened, for one, with a handful of Masters leading them.

There were several reasons for that. The most important of them was that it was easier to maintain secrecy while recruiting Awakened — there were far more Masters in the world these days, but they still were in the public eye. So, Sunny wanted to build a solid foundation out of talented Awakened, prepare them to the best of his ability, and then help those who were ready to climb the Path of Ascension.

If all went well, in a few years, he would have dozens of Masters at his disposal, all trained and raised by the Shadow Clan. And eventually, who knew? Maybe he would even have his own Saints. In fact, maybe he would be able to recruit a couple of Transcendent acquaintances even before that.

For now, though, the power of Shadow Clan was sufficient. His

warriors were not supposed to involve themselves in prolonged battles, anyway — they were supposed to strike from the shadows, eliminate the enemy in one fell swoop, and disappear without leaving a trace.

The Mark of Shadows gave them additional advantages, and he could even personally augment them in case they were in danger.

Combat power was not what made the members of Shadow Clan valuable, though. In truth, Sunny needed them for another purpose — just like his shade warriors, people bearing the Mark of Shadows were conduits of his Supreme shadow sense. Wherever they went, Sunny's perception followed.

And since it was quite difficult for him to enter the waking world these days, the Shadow Clan agents served as his eyes and ears there.

They were spread across all three remaining Quadrants, completing missions while gathering information. Better yet, the Mark of Shadows allowed Sunny access to their Soul Seas — which meant that the Shadow Clan was a force immune to Mordret's insidious powers.

The Prince of Nothing had vanished into thin air, and there was no sign of him anywhere. However, Sunny could not sleep easy knowing that he was somewhere out there, no doubt concocting another terrifying scheme. Even if not, it was better to be prepared for the worst.

There was another threat the Shadow Clan was supposed to be a weapon against… perhaps not a sword, but at least a sharp and expertly hidden dagger.

It was the third Sovereign of humanity, Asterion.

The Dreamspawn.

Very little was known about him, and even now that Nephis and her cohort had become rulers of the world, they could not find a lot of information about the mysterious Supreme. Anvil and Ki Song had been quite thorough in eliminating all information about him, as well

as his followers.

There was some knowledge about him left in the printed books, which were themselves quite rare in the modern day, but nothing detailed. Cassie was hard at work searching for the traces of Asterion, but even her formidable information-gathering talents were not bearing fruit.

All they knew was that the Third Sovereign had been isolated and imprisoned on the moon. He could have very well perished there, but somehow, none of them believed that he had.

Which meant that he could return one day.

The lack of knowledge about a threat of that scale was quite infuriating… and the person who knew Asterion best, Mordret, was nowhere to be found. Without him, they were facing a dead end.

In fact, they did not even know if Asterion was a threat. He could harbor no hostility toward Nephis and her Domain, even if he had played an instrumental role in her father's death.

But just like none of them believed that Asterion was dead, they did not feel like he was a friendly force either.

From everything Sunny had heard about the Dreamspawn, he was an eerie and sinister existence.

So…

The Shadow Clan was preparing to deal with the consequences of Asterion's return, should it ever happen. Even Sunny himself did not know what these preparations should look like, though… all he knew was that Asterion's Domain seemed to have something to do with knowledge of him, and therefore, depended on followers to spread.

Asterion himself was not someone members of the Shadow Clan could fight, but his followers were.

That was why the Dark Lord was sitting on the throne, his consciousness spread across countless shades and various members of the Shadow Clan, absorbing information and watching out for signs

of danger.

Needless to say, he was quite busy while appearing to be very lazy.

At the moment, Sunny was just about to send Kim and Corsair away…

Chapter-2281: New Recruit

Sunny was sitting on his throne, looking down at Kim and Corsair. The former had just finished delivering the report, while the latter was looking at him with a somewhat distant expression.

Corsair — Master Randall's grandson — was lowering his gaze from time to time, studying the tattoo of an onyx snake that now coiled around his arm, peaking from under the rolled sleeve.

The new addition to the Shadow Clan was a tall man with black hair and piercing blue eyes. He had chiseled features and an aloof expression, exuding a sense of calm confidence and lethal danger. All in all, if there was one word Sunny had to use to describe Corsair, it would be… cool.

No, really, Sunny would have killed to look like that as an Awakened. It was like looking at the hero of an Awakened action flick.

…Corsair was going to fit in with the other members of the Shadow Clan, no doubt. They were a colorful cast of characters.

Of course, the new recruit had lost some of his cool after meeting Sunny. Most people were shocked to face the Dark Lord for the first time, although not everyone could hide their bewilderment quite as thoroughly — that was because they all expected to see the fearsome Lord of Shadows, but met a carefree and eccentric young man instead.

There was a reason why Sunny went by "boss", insisted on being called the Dark Lord, and acted like an overgrown child sometimes, though.

First of all... because he wanted to. Now that he was a Supreme, there was no reason to put on a mask, so Sunny could be his true self instead of playing some sinister role. And his true self, well… it was

very far removed from the solemn majesty expected of a Sovereign, as far as people were concerned.

So, the question was not why he would call himself the Dark Lord.

The question was why wouldn't he? It sounded awesome!

There was another reason, as well — the strange way people treated Nephis. The meditation halls that resembled temples, the solemn silence that felt like a prayer, the reverence that smelled of religious zeal… Sunny did not want to be worshiped like a deity. It was strange, and on top of that, Weaver's blood was flowing through his veins.

So, he acted the way he did to kill any inclination his subordinates could have to treat him as some sort of half-baked god.

His act seemed to have worked wonderfully on Corsair, who had entered the throne room with a subtle hint of awe in his cold blue eyes, but was leaving it in pure bafflement instead.

Sunny yawned, then waved a hand at Kim.

"I see… that is good to hear, Kimmy. And yeah, I do know that we need more healers than just Quentin and Fleur. But, you know! Luring a healer into a shady clan of murderous spies is not easy!"

He looked at her with a smile.

"Oh, I have an idea! How about you tell our guys to just do better and not get wounded, in the first place?"

Kim looked at him nonchalantly.

"This shady clan of murderous spies has spent three million credits on medical supplies this quarter, boss."

Sunny froze for a moment.

"Let's poach some healers, Kimmy! Let's do it soon! Those Song sisters have too many… how about we steal a Blood Sister or two from Seishan?"

She took a deep breath and looked at him silently for a bit, then lowered her gaze.

"I'll try."

A few minutes later, the report was over, and he sent them away with a lazy smile.

"Welcome to the Shadow Clan, Corsair! Rest well today — your training will start tomorrow. Of course, there is no sun here on the Forgotten Shore… a friend of mine sort of destroyed it… so day and night are exactly the same, which makes the concept of tomorrow feel vague. But you'll get used to it. Oh, and don't disappoint your teacher. I practically raised her since she was a wee little Awakened Monster… ah, how time flies…"

Corsair paled.

"D—destroyed a sun? No, wait... boss, you raised a Monster?"

Sunny looked at him in confusion.

"Well, yeah. Why, have you never destroyed a sun?

Corsair slowly shook his head.

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then scratched the tip of his nose in embarrassment.

"Oh. No, no! It's nothing to be ashamed of. You… you are still young…"

The new recruit turned to follow Kim with a pained expression on his face. Before he left, though, Sunny suddenly called out to him:

"Hey, Corsair. You used to be a professional killer, right?

Corsair glanced at him and frowned a little.

"To be precise, boss, people hired me to solve problems. If the problem was some scumbag, though… or a group of scumbags… well, then I had to solve them instead."

Sunny looked at him with an expression of deep contemplation, then smiled.

"Wow. That sounded so cool! 'I had to solve them instead'... I'll seriously need to steal that. But anyway, give me some professional advice then. How would one go about killing a sea?"

Corsair blinked.

"Killing… a sea, boss?"

Sunny nodded a couple of times.

"Yes! You see, there is this sea… a very vile sea. We have a score to settle, but I haven't quite figured out how to kill a sea, yet. So I thought maybe you would know, being a professional and all!"

The new recruit remained quiet for a while, then said evenly:

"I have to apologize, boss. That's a bit… outside my area of expertise. I mostly specialized in dealing with humans, Nightmare Creatures, and an occasional rogue killer robot or two."

Sunny sighed.

"I see… well, no matter. I'll figure something out…"

With that, Kim and Corsair left.

Sunny remained on his throne, staring at the ceiling with a bored expression.

Of course, there was a lot happening in his mind.

Hundreds of shadows were moving across the Dark City, clearing it of debris, preparing less damaged buildings for repairs and reconstruction, and marking unsalvageable ones for demolition.

Things on the surface were going well, but the catacombs were still presenting a problem, requiring him to oversee the process personally — not only because of the delicate nature of working underground, but also because the annihilating light of the sun had never reached

the extensive network of tunnels below the city. There were still Nightmare Creatures there…

Gaining control of the catacombs was a vital task, though. A good city started from a robust sewage system, after all. What made people different from beasts?

It was the fact that humans had plumbing, of course!

He needed to decide where and how to bury the countless bones resting in the catacombs, too. He also needed to decide what to do with the collapsed lighthouse of the Dark City… restoring it was possible, but every member of the Shadow Clan could see in the darkness. They did not need a beacon of light.

Potential settlers would be different, though.

Then, there was the issue of the seven colossal statues. The Priestess was right in front of the Dark City, heavily damaged. Sunny could return its broken arm to where it belonged, but then that posed the question — was he supposed to put the severed heads of the statues back where they belonged, as well?

There was so much work…

Additionally, he also kept an eye on the members of the Shadow Clan.

A cohort was hunting down the members of an eerie cult in the bowels of NQSC. Another cohort was preparing to eliminate a Terror that had made a nest in the sewers below a small town in the Western Quadrant and seemed to be targeting children. Yet another cohort was preparing to rob a bank — or rather, extract a seemingly cursed book from a private deposit box there…

'Why did I never think about robbing a bank?'

With his Aspect, it would have been easy.

Sunny sighed.

Then, he froze.

'...Wait. Why have I never thought about opening a bank?'

His eyes twinkled in the darkness.

"Aiko!"

Chapter-2282: Dark Explorer

Far away, a mountain of shattered black stone towered above the sea of dust like a titanic gravestone. The ground around the gravestone was littered with the bones of countless Nightmare Creatures that had perished here… the human bones were buried some distance away, protected from the elements by a barrow.

A stone colossus was kneeling on the ground, unmoving, holding its severed head gently in two titanic hands.

These were the ruins of the Crimson Spire.

Sunny — another one of his incarnations — was in the very heart of the ruins, sitting on the edge of a deep well with a thoughtful expression on his face.

At the bottom of the deep well was a vast pool of black water. Its surface was perfectly still and flat, like that of a harrowing mirror made from pure darkness. Subtle ripples spread across the surface of the imprisoned ocean of darkness from time to time, as though it was straining to spill over the edges of the pool and break free.

It was the Dark Sea.

Once, a long time ago, the Dark Sea had seemed like a force of nature — as in something so inconceivably vast and overwhelmingly destructive that Sunny could not even fathom confronting it. He could barely survive battles with scavengers that hid from the sea and fed on the morbid gifts it left behind, while facing the beings that actually dwelled in the dark waters was a death sentence.

But things were different now.

Now, Sunny knew that the Dark Sea was a Great Titan — a profane being born from the darkness that once dwelled in the radiant figure

who had fallen to this land… before this land was called the Forgotten Shore.

That radiant figure had most likely been a nephilim — or maybe an angel — wounded in one of the battles of the great war between the gods and the daemons. The inhabitants of the land where it had fallen killed the radiant being and unleashed the curse of darkness onto their entire realm. That curse later became the Dark Sea.

In any case, the Dark Sea was a Great Titan now… and Sunny himself was a Supreme Titan.

Strangely enough...

They were equals.

It was an odd thought.

But no matter how strange being equal to the Dark Sea, which had once been like a symbol of inevitable and inescapable death, was… Sunny knew that he could kill it.

He was just not sure how to go about it.

There were the countless Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the sealed sea — slaughtering them would greatly enhance Shadow Legion's capacity to participate in naval battles. But those abominations were not the Great Titan itself.

In truth, Sunny could sense that there were seven great masses of darkness hiding somewhere in the impenetrable depths. He did not know what they were, but finding and destroying them would probably result in the death of the Dark Sea.

He was contemplating if he wanted to dive into the black water and try his luck…

One thing was stopping him, though.

'Curses.'

The problem was not the Dark Sea itself. The problem… was the seal

that imprisoned it below the ruined Crimson Spire.

Even if Sunny managed to destroy the Great Titan, he would just end up being sealed in the bottomless well instead of it — one incarnation of his would, at least.

So, he had to either be willing to sacrifice an incarnation or solve the sorcery of the seven heroes of the Forgotten Shore before diving into the depths of the Dark Sea to destroy it.

"Ah. Damnation."

Even after studying the well for a year, he still did not have the slightest idea about how the seal had been created. It was neither weaving nor runic sorcery… and he was pretty sure that it was not Shaping, either — Shaping was a sorcery of the moment, after all. It never lasted, or at least it was not supposed to.

There were exceptions to everything, of course. His own sister was one such exception. But Sunny still did not believe that the Seven Heroes had been Shapers.

He went through everything he knew about the creation of the Crimson Spire… which was not a lot, to be honest.

All he knew was that an enormous human sacrifice had been involved in its creation, thus giving birth to an artificial sun. At the same time, the curse of darkness had been sealed below the Spire.

He also believed that one of the Seven Heroes — the Builder — had been a big fan of Nether. There were signs of him trying to emulate the Demon of Destiny all over the Dark City… the Black Knight of the ruined cathedral had been one such pale imitation, for example — Sunny was quite sure that the damn Devil was the result of the Builder's attempts to create his own version of the Stone Saints.

The titanic statue of the Builder which was now kneeling behind him was another attempt, albeit a far more ambitious one.

Which was why Saint had treated both the Black Knight and the walking colossus with contempt.

'So… what kind of sorcery did they use to create the seal?'

There was no answer, for now.

Which meant that Sunny could not kill the Dark Sea, for now.

'How frustrating.'

Why was killing one measly Great Titan so difficult? If Sunny was still [Fated], he would have probably tripped and fell face-first directly into the solution of the mystery.

He could not even ask for Cassie's help, because there were no runes for her to study.

Shaking his head, Sunny threw one last look into the depths of the well and stood up.

"Count yourself lucky. I'll come get you one day."

The Dark Sea did not answer.

Scoffing, Sunny took a step back… and disappeared.

A moment later, he was somewhere far away. To be exact, he was far east, in the heart of the great crater that lay between the Dark City and the Ashe Barrow.

The ruins of the Crimson Spire, meanwhile, were west of the Dark City. Back when the Dreamer Army had set out to besiege it, it took them a whole week to reach the ominous tower — but now, he could cover that distance in an instant, without even spending much essence.

"Alright. Next on the agenda…"

Here and there on the bottom of the colossal crater, bones of monstrous sea creatures lay like mountains of dirty ivory. Closer to the center of the crater, though, the ground had turned into black glass, and at its very heart, an ominous round hole led into the depths of the earth.

That was where the Dark Sea had once come from at night, and where it had retreated to at dawn — there were vast caverns below the Forgotten Shore, accessible through several such gaping wounds on its surface.

Sunny had a theory that there was at least one entrance to the Underworld hidden somewhere in these caverns.

So, he had been exploring them leisurely as of late.

Turning into a shadow, Sunny plummeted into the darkness.

Chapter-2283: Deal with the Shadow

The exploration of the caverns below the Forgotten Shore was proceeding smoothly, but slowly.

The Dark Sea — and the Corrupted abominations populating it — had spent thousands of years hiding from the obliterating sun there. So, the ground was covered in countless layers of mud, shards of pulverized coral, shattered bones of dead Nightmare Creatures, and everything else that the receding tide had pulled with it underground.

All of it was resting in eternal, undisturbed darkness… and there were harrowing things hiding in the darkness. Powerful abominations that had not been swallowed by the Crimson Spire when the Great Titan was sealed, swarms of microscopic parasites that could consume a human in moments, pockets of true darkness that rendered Sunny blind, and so much more…

None of it posed a serious threat to him, but he had to proceed with caution.

After all, despite his great power, Sunny was not immortal. He could deal with any Nightmare Creature dwelling on the Forgotten Shore as long as he put his mind to it, but a few moments of carelessness could still cost him an incarnation. He was also quite resistant, but not immune to soul and mind attacks.

On top of that, no matter how powerful one was, there were still all kinds of eerie and bizarre beings in the Dream Realm that simply escaped logic. So, it paid to be careful.

For now, Sunny had not discovered anything too valuable in the vast darkness of the hidden caverns. He did find more than a few

interesting historical artifacts belonging to the extinct civilization of the Forgotten Shore, but that only satiated his curiosity as a Dream Realm explorer, not furthered his goals as a Supreme.

Still, he continued patiently. Every Nightmare Creature he killed made his Shadow Legion stronger, after all — plus, every pool of true darkness was a valuable discovery, since Sunny was contemplating ways of helping Saint attain a higher Rank and Class.

While he explored the caverns, another incarnation of his was laying on the cold marble floor of the Nameless Temple, breathing hoarsely. His body was a map of vicious wounds, and while his jade skin had long repaired itself, the muscles and tendons below were in a sorry state.

"Ah... damnation..."

Groaning quietly, Sunny winced and sat up. He summoned the Endless Spring, drank deeply from it, and then rose to his feet unsteadily.

This particular incarnation of his was recovering from a task that each of them undertook every few weeks or so.

That task was battling Slayer.

Sunny kept the murderous Shadow in the dungeon below the ruined cathedral of the Dark City now — in the stone cell where he had found Weaver's Mask once. Every seven days, he summoned her to the lower hall of the Nameless Temple and had a duel with her.

That had gone on for an entire year. The duels were unfailingly vicious, brutal… and educating. Every week, Sunny barely managed to defeat Slayer, and every week, he ended up in this pitiful state. As a result, one incarnation was always recovering, while a healed one challenged the Shadow the next week.

The recovering avatar performed the role of the Nameless Temple's custodian.

Wincing again, Sunny headed toward the back garden.

"I should take her on a picnic north of the city one day. She'll probably appreciate the Slayer statue… even if that Slayer is missing her head. Two Slayers in one place, will that be funny? Or will that be too much? I wonder…"

A pained smile illuminated his face.

The pain was real, but the duels were showing results.

Initially, Sunny had not known what to do with the murderous Shadow. He had not wanted to destroy her, but he had also been reluctant to compel her into servitude against her will. That went against his principles.

Unlike the silent shadows — the shades, as he called them now to avoid confusion — who lacked the sense of self, his Shadows had their own identity. They were as much individuals as they were parts of him. Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, Fiend, and Mimic seemed more than willing to follow his command, but Slayer did not. So, he would not force her.

But he could not set her free, either. She was a being of chilling lethality and malice, after all, so Sunny was not going to unleash that calamity upon the world out of moral discomfort.

Hence, he fought her every week instead. Their duels had begun as an attempt to communicate — Sunny had hoped to come to some sort of understanding with Slayer, but instead of listening to him, she immediately attacked. So, instead of words, they ended up communicating with sharp steel.

Sunny had been frustrated with her single-minded aggression at first, then indignant, and eventually angry.

Slayer remained doggedly defiant, always aiming to kill and hurt him in any way she could. And as much as Sunny was learning from fighting her, she was learning and adapting from fighting him, as well. So, none of his victories had come easy thus far.

At some point, he had grown unsure why he was even continuing with these painful weekly thrashings. But they had become a habit by

then, almost a ritual, so he decided to simply enjoy them as valuable lessons.

He was regularly sparring with Nephis on the Ivory Island, and with Saint or Slayer here on the Forgotten Shore. Truly, life was spoiling him with wonderful training partners...

But then, something unexpected happened.

After a long string of losses, Slayer seemed to have started to treat him with a kind of... begrudging respect. A sense of kinship, even. She was still unwilling to submit to him, but she was at least willing to strike a deal with him.

As long as Sunny defeated her that week, she would follow his command for a week. Additionally, she demanded payment for each time he summoned her.

Being a Shadow, Slayer naturally had no need for money or worldly treasures. What she wanted as payment instead… was Sunny's blood.

Slayer did not speak, but she easily managed to express her desire with poignant silence. It was a bit strange… and more than a bit creepy… but she seemed to have developed a taste for Sunny's blood — or at least an interest in it — ever since a few drops of it fell on her, and were absorbed by her, from Sunny's torn knuckles during their battle in the Shadow Realm.

Absorbing his blood almost made her seem… more alive, somehow.

In any case, that was their deal now, and that was the price Sunny was paying to benefit from the power of his sixth Shadow.

That, and the pain.

Groaning, Sunny limped across the halls of the Nameless Temple, entered the garden hidden behind the magnificent black Citadel, and used the Endless Spring to water his tree.

Then, he looked up at the starless sky and sighed.

"I wonder when the next storm is coming. We haven't had rain in

months now…"

His expression dimmed, and he grumbled:

"Am I going to have to worry about water supply, too? More work for me, damn it..."

Chapter-2284: Shadow Smith

While the battered incarnation was tending to the Nameless Temple, another one was in the great hall of the ruined cathedral — which had become somewhat of a forge now.

At the far end, under the watchful gaze of the Nameless Goddess, the somber shadow of the King of Swords was forging an enormous breastplate. He was using the altar as an anvil, while the material he forged to create the giant suit of armor was manifested shadows. His hammer rose and fell, shaping the shadows into form…

The former King's face was still and impassive, and his gaze was strangely both full of cold intelligence and empty, lacking the spark of life. He still retained his sublime skill as a blacksmith and artisan, as well as the keen judgment necessary to employ it, but not the will and spirit that made one a person.

The shadow of Anvil had neither desires nor emotions, existing in a tranquil state of silent emptiness.

Still… he looked at peace, almost content, having been given a chance to dedicate himself to his craft even in death. At least Sunny thought so after observing the shadow of Anvil for countless days.

Initially, he had wanted to destroy it. Sunny knew that losing the shadow of a Supreme being would be a great loss for the Shadow Legion, even if it lacked the Will. But he had still wanted to get rid of Anvil's shadow purely out of spite, feeling that its mere presence was tainting his soul.

Yet he eventually decided against it.

Then, he wanted to send the royal shade onto the battlefield. In the end, Sunny decided that the best use for Anvil's shadow was this — toiling as the blacksmith for the growing Shadow Legion.

Sunny crafted the Memories for the members of the Shadow Clan himself, but the shadow legionnaires dwelling in his soul were too many, and different from Awakened humans as well.

None of them possessed the ability to own and summon Memories. Many of them, however, needed weapons and armor — the human shades like Solvane, Daeron, and the seven Saints of the Song Domain he had slain especially. They had lost their own Memory arsenals before coming to rest in his soul, after all, and were therefore forced to fight barehand as his shadow soldiers.

The shadows of the Nightmare Creatures were less disadvantaged in that regard, being that their main weapons were their fangs, claws, talons, mandibles, and various limbs that Sunny did not know the names of. That did not mean that they could not benefit from forged equipment, though.

What was worse than a monstrous beast? A monstrous beast clad in an impenetrable suit of armor was, for sure. And while being torn by a claw was quite bad, being sliced apart by a claw encased in a sheath of sharpened steel was worse.

Sunny's solution to this problem was to make the former Sovereign a weapon master and armorer of the Shadow Legion. So, the shadow of Anvil now resided in the ruined cathedral, forging shadows into weapons and suits of fearsome armor.

Sunny had moved his own workshop and laboratory here, as well — there was plenty of space, and someone had to guard Slayer in her underground cell, anyway.

Crafting the Memories for the Shadow Clan had been a big undertaking — not because they were particularly hard to craft, but simply due to the sheer volume. Some of these exquisite Memories, like the Black Canteen — the heir of Rain's trusty Green Canteen — were standard-issue and given to each member of the clan.

Others looked similar, but were actually carefully designed and tuned to fit the Aspects of the Shadow Clan members — like the suits of armor Sunny created, each containing a reservoir he personally filled with shadow essence, thus allowing even Awakened to use powerful

life-saving enchantments in cases of emergency.

The set of Memories for Corsair was already complete. The Shadow Clan had been watching the prospective recruit for some time, after all, and Sunny already knew all about his Aspect with Cassie's help.

So, at the moment, Sunny was busy with something else.

He was slowly walking across the dark expanse of the ruined cathedral's great hall, looking up with a look of contemplation on his face.

Above him, an infinity of black strands created a vast, mesmerizing pattern — a pattern that was as grandiose as it was daunting, filling the entire length of the great hall and reaching all the way to its ceiling far above.

The pattern was not made out of strings of shadow essence. Instead, it was made simply from manifested shadows.

It was a model of the weave Sunny had been developing for a long time, made visible to ease the burden on his overly taxed mind.

Looking at a particular area of the intricate pattern, Sunny sighed.

"The last solution caused more problems to reveal themselves, huh?"

The weave he was designing was meant to become the foundation of his own shadowbound Memory — a charm that all his incarnations would be able to use.

Unlike how it had happened with the Blessing, there was no Spell to help finish the process this time. So, Sunny had to oversee the entire process himself from start to finish. Considering how many precious resources would go into crafting the charm, he wanted to be extra confident that they would not be wasted.

Looking at the problematic element of the vast weave, Sunny allowed the measured ringing of the dead King's hammer to wash over him and commanded the stands of shadows to rearrange themselves, forming a new pattern.

Then, he scrutinized it with a somber expression.

Eventually, a faint smile illuminated his face.

"That's better. Now, on to the next problem."

There were still many problematic areas of the immense and astoundingly complicated weave, but he was nearing the completion of the ambitious design. Once he did, his power and versatily would hopefully be substantially enhanced.

…Far away, the last two incarnations of Sunny were busy doing something else.

They were waging war on the Burned Forest.

Chapter-2285: Legion of Death

The Burned Forest sprawled under an ashen sky like a dark and desolate reminder of total devastation. Here and there, the charred trunks of titanic trees rose into the sky like crumbled towers, their branches gone, their leaves long turned to ash. Below them, an impenetrable maze of blackened deadfall rose hundreds of meters above the ground, obscuring it completely.

Sunny was standing atop one of the few burned trees that had stubbornly remained upright even in death, looking down at the vast expanse of charred tangle from a great height — two of him, really, one clad in a beautiful suit of black jade armor, the other wearing simple garments of dark cloth.

The one in the armor looked down with an arrogant expression.

"I think we are going to lose again."

The one in the simple clothes smiled faintly, a naughty glint in his eyes.

"Don't sell our legion short."

Below them, a terrifying battle was taking place.

The charred tangle had come alive, frothing with a glistening black substance. That substance was myriads of monstrous millipedes, ranging from several to dozens of meters in length, their bodies covered in glossy black chitin. The millipedes crawled from the depths of the fallen forest, flowing to the surface like a frenzied tide.

Each was a Corrupted Beast, at least, and some even of the Great Rank. There were eerie champions among them, as well — Monsters, Demons, and Devils, the latter defending the vague shapes of the swarm's elusive Tyrants. Some had carapaces that stood out against

the black tide with vibrant colors and chilling patterns, drawing attention to their sinister forms.

The sight of the monstrous vermin was a bit frightening even for someone like Sunny.

"And away… we… go…"

There was another army facing the tide of abominable millipedes, surrounding the towering tree he was standing upon like a wall — just as tenebrous, but much more eerie. This one consisted of silent shadows who faced the terrifying tidal wave of abominations without showing any sign of fear, doubt, or hesitation.

Just then, the first rows of the Shadow Legion moved forward to meet the enemy and break its momentum.

In a morbid twist of fate, this vanguard consisted of the same monstrous millipedes — they were the shadows of Nightmare Creatures slain by Sunny and his legion here in the Burned Forest.

Despite his great power, Sunny and his undying army were not nearly fearsome enough yet to invade the charred remains of the Heart Realm. In the first months of his insolent invasion, he could barely set foot into the Burned Forest without having to retreat.

After all, most of the shades under his command belonged to beings of lower Ranks. There were only a few hundred Great Nightmare Creatures among them, and although the silent shadows could not be destroyed, they could be sent back to his Soul Sea to repair themselves. The restoration was not instantaneous, either, taking longer the more powerful a shade was.

So, in the early days, the Shadow Legion had been easily wiped out by the Nightmare Creatures populating the outskirts of the Burned Forest — their sheer number was enough to overwhelm the undying army of the newly risen Sovereign.

Once most of his shades were vanquished, Sunny had no choice but to escape. Progress was not just slow, it was almost non-existent.

However…

There was an insidious quality to the Legion of Death. With each battle, even the ones they lost… Sunny and his Domain were only growing stronger.

Every abomination slain by him or his minions in these hopeless battles joined the ranks of silent shadows. At first, there were a dozen shadow millipedes fighting for him. Then, a hundred.

As days passed, their number swelled to thousands, and the Shadow Legion started to advance into the depths of the Burned Forest, gaining ground meter after meter.

Now, a year later, he had ventured far enough to draw close to the nests of the monstrous millipede tribe. That was why their elusive Tyrants were showing up on the battlefield in person now.

Sunny's goal was to locate and destroy the nests. Once the nearby nests were conquered and destroyed, the outskirts of the Burned Forest — in the south, at least — would fall into his hands. He even had a faint hope that one of them would reveal a hidden Citadel.

Of course, these were merely the outer reaches of the Heart God's fallen realm. Deeper into the dreadful land, beings far more terrifying than the monstrous millipedes dwelled… so, it would take Sunny years to subjugate the Death Zone completely, if he could manage that astounding feat at all.

But that was alright.

Conquering the Burned Forest was not his primary goal, after all. The primary goal was to make the ranks of his Shadow Legion swell with powerful shades, and in that regard, he was doing quite well.

Down below, the tide of millipedes collided with the shadows of their fallen brethren. An ear-piercing cacophony of chitinous scraping and inhuman screeches washed over the charred wasteland, and the ground shook slightly.

Sunny had never thought that he would one day command a force of thousands of Corrupted Nightmare Creatures — or rather, Transcendent shadows of thousands of slain Nightmare Creatures.

And yet, today… that same force was swallowed by the dreadful flood of his enemy in less than a minute, disappearing without a trace.

The shades of the millipedes returned to his Soul Sea, obliterated.

"...Almost a full minute today. Not bad."

His armored incarnation glanced at the smiling one and scoffed.

"Not good, either."

Still, the shadow swarm of monstrous millipedes had done its job — they had served as a sacrifice to break the momentum of the dreadful flood, inflict heavy casualties on it, and gain him a few hundred new shades.

Now, it was time for the cavalry to honor their sacrifice and crush more enemies.

The armored incarnation smiled darkly.

"There she is."

Far below, a graceful knight in fearsome onyx armor nudged her dreadful steed forward.

Her sword cut the air, and the Shadow Legion stirred, coming alive in a chilling veil of dead silence.

Even if they lost again today, they would triumph eventually.

Death was patient, after all.

And above all else, it was inevitable.

Chapter-2286: Bountiful Harvest

As Nightmare leaped across the tangled surface of the charred deadfall and landed on the fallen trunk of an enormous tree, easily hundreds of meters across, champions of the Shadow Legion surged forward.

The rushing millipedes cowered as the aura of dread surrounding the black steed washed over them like a cold wave. A split second later, Saint's dark blade fell, slicing the chitin like paper.

Not far behind her, something massive moved, the ground shaking as it did — as if a dark hill was moving across the fallen trees. Then, the towering figure opened its four arms wide and let out a low, terrifying roar that reverberated across the battlefield like the voice of an erupting volcano.

Infernal flames ignited in the depths of the steel giant's maw, and his eyes blazed with fire.

…Fiend had hit a growth spurt in the wake of the war in Godgrave.

The tiny imp used to be no taller than Sunny's knee, but now, he towered above the battlefield at more than forty meters in height, his powerful body encased in an impenetrable steel carapace and littered with countless sharp spikes — like a hellish colossus cast from numerous great swords.

As the red flames burning within him flared to life, Fiend lowered his torso and lunged forward, crushing the millipedes under his feet and slicing them apart with his enormous, chillingly sharp claws.

A moment later, King Daeron entered the fray, wearing a regal suit of armor forged of shadows and wielding a heavy mace. Wind Flower, twin shadows of Solvane, and the seven Saints of Song were not far behind him — some as humans wielding sharp weapons, some having

assumed their Transcendent forms. The latter, too, were wearing armor forged to fit their bestial forms by Anvil's shadow.

So were the shades of the Great Nightmare Creatures Sunny had slain in Godgrave. The old predators of the abominable jungle had always been powerful and deadly, but now that their dreadful bodies were protected by armor forged of shadows, their claws and fangs turned to even deadlier weapons, they were both more resilient and far more devastating.

Every other elite of the Shadow Legion rushed forward, as well — the Defiled Seeker of Truth, Goliath, Remnant of the Jade Queen, the Asuras of Condemnation…

And following them, a sea of Corrupted shades tore into the tide of monstrous millipedes too.

A scene of terrifying violence took place under the watchful gaze of Sunny's incarnations.

Countless millipedes were being destroyed — only to join the ranks of the Shadow Legion moments later. His shades fell, as well, disappearing from under the ashen sky in indifferent silence.

"Do you think we will win today?"

Sunny looked at himself and answered his own question with a shrug.

"...It's doubtful."

Then, he looked at the battlefield and smiled coldly.

"Today's harvest will be just fine, though."

He laughed at himself, shaking his head in amusement.

"Look at you, talking like the Grim Reaper."

The Shadow Legion stood its ground against the overwhelming flood of abominable black millipedes. Despite the fact that the enemy vastly outnumbered them, Sunny's shades were ruthless and fearless. His champions — Saint, Fiend, and the others — were especially

devastating, leaving a trail of severed and crushed bodies in their wake.

Still, it wasn't quite enough.

Soon enough, his forces would be exhausted, most of them sent back to his Soul Sea, and Sunny would have to retreat once again.

Not yet, though.

The ground trembled.

His armored incarnation sighed.

"I told you. They are getting smarter. It used to be that they simply attacked us like a mindless mob, but their strategies are growing more and more nuanced."

Just then, another flood of millipedes suddenly crawled from under the deadfall behind the Shadow Legion, encircling it. A moment later, his shades were attacked from the rear, many of them crumbling and dissolving into streams of darkness.

The millipedes had already shown signs of intelligent behavior once the Demons and Devils of their profane tribe started participating in the battles. Now that the Tyrants were involved, their tactics had become even more complex.

For example, they used the nature of the tangled terrain of the Burned Forest masterfully, moving unseen in the depths of the charred deadfall to stage devastating ambushes and appear unexpectedly behind the enemy.

The armored incarnation chuckled.

"Isn't it time for you to act?"

Sunny smiled.

"Indeed…"

Taking a step forward, he lept off the edge of the towering trunk and

plummeted down, toward the distant ground.

A river of darkness escaped from the Shadow Lantern, surrounding his body.

By the time Sunny landed, he was enveloped in the Shadow Shell of the dark colossus, at least a hundred meters high…

Finally, he was just as tall as Effie's Transcendent form.

Reaching into the shadows to manifest a terrifying odachi, Sunny summoned the Jade Mantle to cover his titanic body and lunged at the colossal centipede that threatened to swallow a dozen of his shadows in one bite.

His appearance on the battlefield caused a stir, forcing several of the Great Devils leading the millipede tribe to rush in his direction.

…Left alone on the charred trunk, Sunny inhaled deeply.

He was far more powerful than any of his champions, of course. However, unlike the shades, if his incarnation was destroyed, it would be gone forever — so, he had to be cautious about entering a battle as disadvantaged and doomed as this one.

Especially since he was using himself as bait.

As dozens of millipedes climbed up the legs of the shadow colossus, seeking the cracks in his armor to crawl inside and sink their mandibles into the Shell, Sunny slowly exhaled.

"I already gave you my blood. So, if you will…"

A moment later, he stepped into the shadows, appeared hundreds of meters away, and wrapped himself around Slayer's lithe body.

"Go and hunt."

The murderous Shadow moved.

By now, she was armed with a sinister bow that Sunny had personally crafted for her, carried a quiver of eerie arrows, and had

two terrifying short swords sheathed at her waist.

Rising from the shadows of the Burned Forest, Slayer moved like a ghost and drew the string of her bow in one smooth, elegant motion.

A moment later, a sharp arrow pierced the head of one of the Great Tyrants leading the swarm of monstrous millipedes, causing thousands of them to shudder and lose cohesion.

Chapter-2287: Will to Kill

Slayer was a strange being. She was a Shadow whose dark depths were illuminated by the silver light of pure soul essence. She was not quite Supreme, but also not quite Transcendent — and, while she fought under Sunny's dark banner, she was not loyal or devoted to him.

Her prey, the Great Tyrant controlling a vast swath of the abominable swarm, was quite a strange creature as well.

In fact, Sunny had been convinced that the black millipedes were no different from a mindless mob at first, ruled by no one and only beholden to their bestial instincts. It was only after suffering several crushing defeats recently that he guessed the existence of a guiding force behind them. Even then, it took him a long time to discover the Tyrants…

Which was too long, considering how nearly omniscient he was when his shadow sense reached far and wide.

As it turned out, the Great Tyrants of the Black Millipede tribe were elusive creatures. It was hard to catch a glimpse of their blurry forms, and even harder to ambush them — that was because they, too, existed in a transient ambivalence of being split between two states.

Only, unlike Slayer, who was torn between two Ranks, the Millipede Queens seemed to exist in the fleeting gaps between two moments. At least that was what Sunny deduced after failing to kill them on several occasions.

These Great Tyrants did not exist in the present, remaining forever hidden a moment in the past and a moment in the future. And since it was impossible to destroy something that did not exist, Sunny had failed to slay them time after time.

It was an odd and paradoxical ability, to say the least. However, it was also the kind of unreasonable power Sunny expected from beings of the Great Rank.

Apart from the defensive camouflage of time, the Millipede Queens were massive, encased in a fearsome carapace of impenetrable chitin, capable of giving birth to an endless flood of lesser abominations, and usually safely hidden inside their fortress-like nests on top of that.

There were seven of them, from what Sunny could tell, and today, his goal was to kill at least one.

Facing six annihilating swarms was not going to be much easier than facing seven of them, and the orphaned millipedes would most likely be simply absorbed into the armies of the remaining Queens, thus making them stronger. However, it would still be a breaking point in his war against the Black Millipede tribe.

That was because once one of the monstrous Queens joined his Shadow Legion, she would be able to exert control over the thousands of shades of their fallen offspring that were already there. Thus, his own growing swarm of abominable millipedes would become many times deadlier in an instant.

So, being thrashed by Slayer and feeding her his blood was a small price to pay.

While one incarnation of Sunny distracted the Devils who guarded the Queens, Slayer had been laying in ambush. It was not an easy feat, to conceal herself from the endless tide of Nightmare Creatures, many of whom were immensely powerful and possessed senses that humans had not even heard about, but she managed to remain hidden even under their noses.

Or whatever it was the monstrous millipedes had instead of noses…

In any case, Slayer had risen from the shadows and sent an arrow flying. She had always been a chillingly powerful being, and now, her power was augmented by Sunny as well. He shared Slayer's senses, feeling the deadly precision of her movements, her calm and

merciless determination to kill, the cold lethality of her willpower.

A Great Tyrant was a fearsome existence — just one of them was enough to obliterate an entire continent in the waking world, turning great cities to ruin and consuming hundreds of millions of unfortunate souls in a matter of days, if not hours.

Everything about them was the epitome of tyrannical power and inescapable dread. Their towering bodies could crush mountains, and their impenetrable armor could easily shake off even the most terrible of attacks.

And yet, Slayer's arrow easily pierced the Millipede Queen's head, as if not meeting any resistance.

That was because her will was stronger than the Great Tyrant's will. Not only was it stronger, but it was also sharper, shaped into a penetrating blade instead of falling like a hammer.

'Oh… so it can be done like that, as well…'

Even in the middle of the battle, Sunny did not miss the chance to learn a new lesson.

He had completed his Transcendent Battle Art, already. His swordsmanship did not require further breakthroughs — however, a Transcendent Battle Art as a whole could still be elevated to a Supreme Battle Art.

The difference between the two was simple. A Supreme Battle Art contained an entirely new dimension — an unseen and abstract one, but vitally important nevertheless. The dimension of will.

To master it, Sunny had to learn how to infuse his will into his every movement and strike, wielding it with just as much finesse and precision as he could exert when wielding a sword. He had already made the initial breakthrough during his battle against Anvil, learning from the Supreme Battle Art of the King of Swords, and made great strides in mastering his Will in the past year.

But there was still room to improve, and there was no better example than Slayer.

After all, Slayer was an ancient and supremely accomplished killer. She had existed for far longer than Sunny, had hunted far more beings than Sunny, and had honed her Will to a much deadlier blade than Sunny.

Otherwise, she would not have persisted for thousands of years in the Shadow Realm, refusing to succumb to death.

'...Curious.'

The arrow had pierced the Millipede Queen's head, but it did not kill the terrible creature. In fact, the damage it dealt was far more modest than Sunny had expected.

He contemplated for a split second.

'Ah, so that is why. I see.'

In a battle of this level of power, the Will was both a weapon and an armor, playing a role that was just as important as the actual items. However, it did not exist in and of itself. The Will needed a medium to be expressed, and that medium, naturally, was the individual to whom the Will belonged.

But things were more complicated than that…

It seemed that the Will had to be expressed directly — the fewer intermediaries there were between the source and the target, and the closer the point of contact was, the more effective the result.

In this case, the source of the Will was Slayer. Sunny was involved, as well — not because he was augmenting her body, but because he had crafted her bow and arrow, imprinting them with his own Will.

However, the sum of their willpowers that should have overwhelmed the Millipede Queen had merely wounded the creature lightly. That was because Slayer had not expressed her Will directly — instead, her Will had been delivered across a great distance by an arrow.

It was as if the force of her Will was dissipated by the distance and the involvement of an intermediary.

In other words, an attack would have carried the most Will if Slayer had struck with her bare hands. Using a sword would have also been quite effective, since she would have held it in her hand, channeling her Will through it.

However, a ranged weapon was an inferior vessel for one's Will. A bow was somewhat better than other weapons in that regard, since it at least had to be drawn by the archer's own hand, using the archer's own strength. A crossbow would have shown a worse result, and a bullet would have contained very little Will — if any at all.

No wonder contemporary weapons lost most of their effectiveness when used against Nightmare Creatures of the Fallen Rank and higher. Even at that level, the Will already played an important role… impersonal attacks could not penetrate the armor of latent Will these beings possessed.

A sword wielded by an Awakened warrior, however, could.

Sunny whistled.

'This is quite curious. Entirely unscientific, of course.'

There was also an interesting conundrum to be solved about his will as the Lord of Shadows, the manifested shadows, and their capacity to channel his Will.

That was something he would have to ponder later, though…

For now, there was still a wounded Great Tyrant they had to kill.

Even though ranged weapons seemed to be less effective in the battle of truly powerful beings, that did not mean that they were useless. It was just that great skill was required from the one wielding them — skill that Slayer possessed with plenty to spare.

That was why her arrow had pierced the Millipede Queen's head without much trouble. And even though it did not deal too much damage… that was not its purpose, either.

The arrow Slayer had chosen to begin her barrage was a special one, crafted by Sunny while inspired by the [In Case of Emergency]

Memory that belonged to Rain — a sash that could fix her position in space, and which was meant to save her life in case the Cloudveil in Godgrave broke without warning.

The arrow's purpose was quite similar — it was to root the enemy in place.

Of course, the Millipede Queen was far too powerful, and possessed too dreadful of a Will to be slowed down by the enchantment for long. In fact, she broke free of the sorcerous binding a moment later…

But in that short moment, the Great Tyrant was completely exposed, rooted not only in space, but also in time, and therefore robbed of her strange camouflage.

In that short moment, three more arrows slid between the cracks in the Queen's indestructible carapace.

These ones dealt far more damage.

…In fact, the damage they dealt was catastrophic.

The colossal millipede's neck exploded from the inside, whole chunks of flesh and cracked chitin flying into the air. Rivers of blood plummeted down like crimson waterfalls, and countless lesser abominations shuddered, losing cohesion.

The Millipede Queen let out an earth-shattering screech and swayed, expressing its pain and fear. The Great Devils who had moved to deal with Sunny rushed back to answer their matriarch's panicked call…

But it was already too late.

Because Slayer had already drawn her bow again, and already sent another arrow flying.

The slaying arrow.

A split second later, the Queen's enormous head was severed cleanly from her neck.

Chapter-2288: Ember Queen

The moment Slayer's first arrow hit the Millipede Queen, Sunny saw the Great Tyrant clearly for the first time.

She was quite enormous, her bulbous body encased in glistening black chitin and decorated with beautiful patterns of orange-red, as if inlaid with burning embers. The first segment of her carapace flared at the back of her head, making it seem as if the appalling creature was wearing a crown.

She had no eyes, so the front of her armored head was flawlessly smooth before opening into a monstrous, eerily human-like maw.

That maw was now open, the last scream dying in its depths.

The Millipede Queen was at least a hundred meters long, her segmented body quite thin in relation to its great length, and had been flowing across the tangled surface of the Burned Forest like a river of glistening darkness, her countless legs shredding the dead wood into splinters as she did. But now, the giant creature had come to an abrupt halt and fell in a mess of towering black coils…

Her severed head was yet to hit the ground by the time Sunny heard a voice whispering into his ear:

[You have slain an enemy.]

He sighed in regret.

Sunny had always missed the Nightmare Spell when the Handy Bracelet announced his kills. After all, unlike the Spell, this Memory of his was not omniscient — it did not know the names of the Nightmare Creatures he slayed, thus robbing him of the tantalizing tidbits of knowledge that were hidden in them.

It was to the point that Sunny sometimes regretted that kidnapping Cassie and forcing her to whisper the names of all abominations he killed into his ear at all times was not an option.

And now, the Handy Bracelet could not even gauge the Rank and Class of the slain Nightmare Creatures. That was because Sunny had built this particular part of the enchantment on a simple principle — the bracelet sensed how many shadow fragments he received from the kill, and determined the nature of the slain abomination accordingly.

However, Sunny did not receive any shadow fragments when the Millipede Queen died. Not because it had perished to Slayer instead of him, but simply because all seven of his cores were already fully saturated.

If he bothered to summon his runes, he would see a beautiful…

Shadow Fragments: [7000/7000].

That had happened quite swiftly after the Shadow Legion was unleashed upon the world, considering that every being killed by one of his shades was counted as his own prey. Well, and he had ventured into the Shadow Realm as well, hunting down shadows on its outskirts to hasten the process.

Sunny was already as powerful as he could become. Now, killing enemies empowered his Shadow Legion instead of his soul.

'I should probably redesign the Handy Bracelet…'

There had to be a way to enchant his bracelet into drawing knowledge directly from the newly arrived shades instead of counting the shadow fragments. Who knew? Maybe it would even be able to learn more about them, that way.

But now was not the time to contemplate interesting enchantments.

The Millipede Queen's severed head fell to the ground in a rain of blood and broken chitin. Thousands of lesser abominations seemed to lose cohesion for a few moments, then exploded into a mindless frenzy.

The other Great Tyrants took note of their sister and rival dying, as well…

Most importantly, Slayer had revealed herself to the enemy swarm.

Now, she and Sunny were alone behind enemy lines, facing the frenzied flood of monstrous millipedes in solitude.

Nevertheless, he was satisfied.

He was ecstatic.

'I won!'

His victory over the Black Millipede tribe would not be cemented for a while — a few months, most likely — but it had been decided the moment the monstrous Queen died. Now that her shade was in his Soul Sea, the power of the Shadow Legion would increase… and it would continue to increase exponentially as more Black Millipedes joined the ranks of silent shadows.

The nests of their abominable tribe would fall.

He considered summoning the Ember Queen — a name Sunny gave the slain Great Tyrant in the absence of the Nightmare Spell due to the fiery patterns on her black carapace — right now, but then decided against it.

After all, the shades of lesser millipedes had already been dispelled. They would not be restored for a few days. So, her presence would not shift the scales of the battle in his favor today.

Sunny watched the harrowing flood of powerful Nightmare Creatures rush at Slayer as a tide.

'I think… they might be angry.'

He smiled internally, happy with his harvest. Finally, after all this time, one of the Millipede Queen's was in his grasp.

Slayer lowered her bow and allowed it to turn into a slender black chain, which wrapped itself around her wrist like an intricate

vambrace. Then, she unsheathed her short swords and faced the frenzied swarm with cold, fearless malice.

As if fighting thousands of Corrupted and Great Nightmare Creatures was not something worthy of her trepidation.

"You can retreat now."

He had already accomplished the main goal of today's battle, so letting his Shadows sustain damage served no purpose.

Slayer lingered for a few moments. Her lips were hidden behind a veil, but he could sense her smile faintly — there was no joy in that smile, of course, just a hint of cold and sinister contempt.

Throwing one last look at the approaching millipedes, she sheathed her swords in one smooth motion and turned her back to them, moving with the elegance of a graceful dancer. The skirt of her light armor swayed, and a moment later, she was gone — summoned back to her cell in the dark replica of the Nameless Temple.

Sunny himself stepped through the shadows and appeared by Saint's side, wrapping himself around her to bestow more power on the general of his Shadow Legion.

The battle raged on for some time after that, even though the outcome was already clear.

Saint and Nightmare slayed a few champions of the Black Millipede Tribe, while Fiend made a show of picking up handfuls of desperately struggling abominations and throwing them into his infernal maw. The gluttonous giant seemed quite happy.

The most powerful shades distinguished themselves in the carnage, as well.

Of course, no one was more deadly than Sunny himself.

His towering Shell clashed with the giant Great Devils — some of them even larger than their Tyrants. He had to kill a few, since his own Millipede Queen was going to need powerful protectors.

And he did manage to destroy two of them before things turned for the worse.

At some point, one of the Devils opened its maw and spat a long jet of boiling orange-red liquid, which splashed across Sunny's jade breastplate like a stream of incandescent lava. To his shock, the surface of the Mantle actually began to melt, as if being eaten through by acid.

Another Devil breathed out a cloud of ash that surrounded Sunny, then turned into a swarm of ghostly worms that wriggled their way into the cracks of his armor, penetrating the mass of the Shadow Shell to find his own shadow hidden deep within it.

A third Devil emerged from the tangle below, wrapping its revolting body around his legs. The thousand scythe-like legs of the Great abominations were like a chainsaw, biting into the Jade Mantle with harrowing force.

There were lesser millipedes burrowing into the flesh of his Shell, as well, having found paths inside through the cracks created by the Devils.

Somewhat regretful, Sunny had to abandon the crumbling Shell and continue the battle as himself instead.

Soon enough, the battle was over.

His Shadow Legion was largely annihilated, and those of its champions that remained were drowning in the endless swarm of abominations. No matter how powerful they were, and how powerful Sunny was, they simply could not resist the sheer numbers of the Black Millipede tribe.

So, not wishing to have to wait until his most powerful shades restored themselves, Sunny simply summoned them back into his soul, dismissed his Shadows, and escaped by using Shadow Step.

'Damn it! All those soul shards...'

If there was one regret he had, it was that he would not be able to harvest the carapaces of the slain millipedes and their soul shards

today. Instead, they would be devoured by their own kin, making the surviving abominations stronger and giving the remaining Queens enough fuel to birth more monsters.

It was all going to be his in the end, though.

Reaching the edges of the Burned Forest, both incarnations of Sunny stepped out of the shadows and smiled, satisfied despite suffering another defeat.

Chapter-2289: Paid Leave

Sunny's incarnations stood at the very edge of the charred tangle, looking out on the rows of ancient barrows beyond.

The land of barrows separated the Forgotten Shore from the Burned Forest, serving as the boundary between these two dark realms.

One of the incarnations dismissed the heavily damaged Jade Mantle, allowing it to retreat under his skin… or rather, into his skin.

Then, he smiled mischievously.

"...How much are you willing to bet that whatever is sleeping in these barrows will one day wake up and make us regret having turned our backs on it?"

The other avatar shrugged arrogantly.

"When it does, we will kill it, then bury it properly this time."

Sunny had not ventured inside the barrows after that ominous first time, preferring to keep watch on them from a distance. Of course, he would have to deal with that threat sooner or later… but for now, he was willing to let the mystery of the ancient burial ground rest, since it wasn't actively bothering him.

There was a reason why he suspected that the tall barrows represented a threat, and it wasn't just the eerie feeling they gave him. More important was the fact that the Dark Sea had never reached past the barrows, meaning that it had been wary of them.

Of course, it could just as well have been because of the sky above. Here, on the boundary of two realms, the starless sky of the Forgotten Shore gave way to a sky that still enjoyed the company of its sun, and was therefore infused with sunlight.

But Sunny still was wary of the eerie barrows.

Letting out a sigh, one of the incarnations asked:

"So, what do you think?"

The other pondered for a few minutes.

"It wasn't bad, I guess? We did manage to kill the Queen, and the harvest of the lesser shades was quite bountiful. However… I am not satisfied. We are still lacking."

The first incarnation nodded.

"Indeed."

This invasion of the Burned Forest served several purposes. One was to strengthen the Shadow Legion, another was to search for unclaimed Citadels, the third was to explore the Dream Realm in preparation for the eventual integration of the waking world...

However, no less important was the fact that Sunny learned how to wield his Supreme power here.

His Supreme Ability, [Shadow Legion], was in a sense an ultimate expression of his Aspect. He was not even sure if it was really an Ability in and of itself — it could have been a logical conclusion of his other Abilities reaching their pinnacle, instead.

The legion of silent shadows was his Domain. It granted him power, nurtured his soul, and gave weight to his will.

The [Shadow Legion] Ability, meanwhile, allowed him to unleash his Domain upon the world.

He could summon the shades from the depths of his soul, give shape to them, and control them as his loyal soldiers… which felt like an evolution of his [Shadow Step], [Shadow Manifestation], and [Shadow Control] Abilities. The shades also served as vessels of his consciousness, inheriting some traits from his Transformation Ability as well.

However…

There were limitations to this power.

Unlike the puppets of Ki Song or the swords of Anvil of Valor, the silent shadows were independent entities. Therefore, Sunny could not control them directly — he could only give them commands, which the shades followed to the best of their ability.

Their ability to follow commands varied greatly among the members of the Shadow Legion, though. After all, most of his legionnaires were beasts and monsters — creatures lacking intelligence and awareness. And even those of the shades who were truly sentient lacked the cohesion one would expect from a trained army.

In other words, even though Sunny was calling his army the Shadow Legion, in truth, it was more of a Shadow Mob — not much different from the mindless swarm of the Black Millipedes, and even inferior to it in some regards.

The situation was somewhat improved by the presence of certain champions. Saint could act as a general, helping him control the Shadow Legion better. Daeron of the Twilight Sea was capable of rallying the human shadows behind him. The Remnant of the Jade Queen seemed to hold authority among the weaker shades…

But each of the champions could only truly control a small number of shades in their vicinity. There was no overall unity, let alone discipline and cohesion.

And even Sunny's formidable mind could not command each shade individually, guiding them with intricate precision.

So, things like orderly battle formations, complicated maneuvers, and fine tactics were beyond the scope of what the Shadow Legion could do… for now.

Sunny had been learning how to lead it into battle better for the entire year, but he was still far from achieving acceptable results.

One of his incarnations smiled and patted the other on the shoulder.

"Well… at least we have the Ember Queen now. She alone should be able to control the millipede swarm. So, you'll be fine."

The other looked at him arrogantly.

"Naturally. Why wouldn't I be fine?"

Sunny laughed, then let out a sigh and threw one last look at the Burned Forest.

He was not going to miss this place…

Especially because he was staying in that place. One of his incarnations was, at least.

"Then my job here is done. I guess I'll get going."

His other incarnation looked at him with no compassion.

"Get lost, then."

Sunny looked at himself, a betrayed expression on his face.

"Wow. How heartless. Don't you have any pity on your poor self? I'll be all alone out there… surrounded by beautiful princesses and hanging out with Kai…"

His other incarnation scoffed.

"Bastard. Go before I change my mind and volunteer myself."

Sunny smiled naughtily.

"Alright, alright! Gods… can you at least lend me a Shadow? I probably can't take Saint, and Fiend will draw too much attention. What about Nightmare?"

The other incarnation stared at him coldly.

"You can take the feral one."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Slayer? Well… it might work, I guess. Like a field trip. A paid vacation?"

With that, he chuckled and headed for the distant barrows.

As Sunny was walking away, he waved at himself.

"You're going to miss me when I'm gone!"

Then, he stared at his own back and snarled.

"As if! And why are you walking, idiot? Just turn back into a shadow!"

Soon, one of the incarnations disappeared from view. The other studied the eerie barrows, then sighed and turned back to the charred expanse of the Burned Forest.

"Say hi to Kai when you get there, fool. Godspeed."

Despite the quiet grumbling… he couldn't wait.

Chapter-2290: False Alarm

Far away in Bastion, the morning meeting was coming to an end. Effie gave Sunny one last glare and left, while Cassie whisked Nephis away to attend to her imperial duties.

This time, he did not follow.

Instead, Sunny closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, concentrating on his shadow sense.

'So, I'm finally off to Ravenheart…'

He was not going to have to cross the Hollow Mountains again to reach it, but the journey would still take some time and be unpleasant. After all, he had to return to the waking world and endure being rejected by it.

Still, Sunny was in a good mood.

He was looking forward to finally exploring the Jade Palace, and on top of that, he was curious about the city itself.

Ravenheart did not exactly feel like home, but Sunny had spent almost four years there, hiding in Rain's shadow. There were many places in that stark city he felt nostalgic about. He was also curious to see how Ravenheart had changed in the wake of the Raven Queen's fall.

But most of all, he missed Kai.

Sunny had reconnected with Nephis and Cassie after being erased from the memories of the world, and he had also become somewhat close to Effie again — first as Master Sunless, then as Neph's shadow consort.

But he had barely spent time with Jet and Kai in the past two years. They only knew him as the cold and sinister Lord of Shadows — a mysterious ally who had joined their cause not long before the war started.

'I wonder how he is doing.'

Sunny knew that Kai had managed to conquer Ravenheart without spilling a single drop of blood. The local population was quite fond of him — well, obviously! — but it still had to be difficult, dealing with the Song sisters in the wake of the dissolution of their mother's Domain.

'Well, I'll see soon.'

As he shifted his attention, Sunny felt Bastion boiling with life far below him. His shadow sense enveloped most of the city, allowing him to monitor various things and learn of any potential dangers in advance — not that there had been any threats here, yet.

Apart from the nights when the moon was full. But they had that particular danger under control.

There were too many people and too much movement in the city to fathom it all — Sunny could try, but his senses would be swiftly overwhelmed.

His mind had grown much more powerful over the years, however — both because he climbed high on the Path of Ascension and because he had plenty of practice handling countless tasks at the same time. He was not the same person who had almost collapsed after spreading his shadow sense across the outskirts of NQSC.

Sunny was even tempted to summon Weaver's Mask and activate the [Where is my eye?] enchantment one more time. It had almost killed him the last time he used it, but who knew? Maybe he would survive its lethal burden this time.

What would he see in the endlessly vast, overwhelming, harrowing tapestry of fate? Would he see himself severed from its infinite complexity, existing separately from all that had been, was, and ever

would be? Was he going to recognize the events of the future and of the past in the complicated weave of the strings of fate?

Or would he die a miserable death, all seven of his heads exploding into a bloody mess at the same time?

Sunny did not know, and he was too wary to attempt it… for now.

Somewhere out there, one of the four remaining pieces of Weaver's lineage was waiting for him… the Mind Weave.

Sunny had decided not to tempt fate before recovering it.

For now, though…

Even though he could not actively pay attention to everything happening in Bastion, he could sense it passively and turn his attention to any unusual disturbance. He could also focus on particular places and individuals selectively.

Right now, he was searching for Rain.

His sister was especially easy to discover due to the Mark of Shadows. Because of it, he was almost always aware of where she was — as long as she remained in the vast area his shadow sense enveloped.

Sunny did not actively follow Rain most of the time, though, preferring to give her some space.

After all, he was not an utterly overprotective brother…

And even if he was, who could blame him?

His sister was in the habit of enlisting in suicidal wars and brawling with deadly Nightmare Creatures!

And if some slimy profligate bothered her, she couldn't even kill him!

She couldn't hurt a fly.

Well, actually, she could hurt a fly quite gruesomely. But she couldn't end its vile, lecherous life!

Who would not be protective of a sweet, kind sister like that?

'Where is she? Wait… why is she dressed like that?'

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

Far below, Rain was making her way across the crowded streets of Bastion. She must have worked through the night with Beth and her team, but instead of wearing her usual practical clothes or the Puppeteer's Shroud, she was wearing a pretty black dress instead, its hem barely reaching her knees.

She was also wearing earrings — not even enchanted ones — and completely impractical, cutesy shoes. Her hair was done up and held together with an onyx pin.

Sunny could not tell through shadow sense, but he was sure she had also applied light makeup.

His face paled.

'A—alarm!'

Oblivious to the turmoil in her brother's heart, Rain was enjoying the morning sun while humming a melody with a happy smile.

Soon enough, she reached her destination — a luxurious cafe situated on the most beautiful stretch of the Lakefront Promenade. Walking through the door, she paused for a moment and looked around.

Then, he smile widened, and she waved.

"There you are!"

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'Oh... it's them. False alarm.'

Two beautiful young women were waiting for Rain at a table that had the best view.

One had tan skin and ashen hair, her off-shoulder peach dress

revealing the smooth line of her delicate collarbone. The other had fair skin and glistening blonde hair, her amber eyes burning in the golden light of dawn. Her white dress was light and tastefully adorned with lace, making her look like a fairy tale princess on an outing.

They were, of course, Tamar of Clan Sorrow and Telle of White Feather.

Today, the three noble girls had discarded their usual enchanted armor, donned pretty dresses, and dolled themselves up to the best of their ability to have a nice breakfast out on the town and remind themselves that they were, indeed, girls — and not Awakened battle machines.

Rain reached the table and sat down with a brilliant smile.

"Sorry I'm late!"

Telle stared at her for a while, then shifted her gaze to Tamar's bare shoulder.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Did… did you guys get matching tattoos?"

She pursed her lips, looked at them with a strange expression, and added in a small voice:

"...Without me?"

Chapter-2291: An Elegant and Noble Outing

Rain laughed and glanced at the intricately inked snake that coiled around her arm and shoulder. Tamar wore a dress with long sleeves, so hers was mostly out of sight — only its tail could be seen, resting on her smooth caramel skin.

"Sorry, Telle… I can get you in touch with the artist, but I doubt that your parents will approve."

Telle leaned back with a sour expression.

"My mom has a wild side too, you know? One time, she went and killed a Valor Saint. Our entire family was sent to Antarctica as punishment. But, whatever…"

She threw one last look at Tamar's shoulder and turned away with a haughty scoff.

"I wouldn't want a snake tattoo, anyway. Birds eat snakes."

She didn't quite manage to hide the hint of envy from her voice, though, which almost made Rain giggle.

Telle and Tamar were quite similar in the sense that they both had been raised by stern Legacy rulers, and tended to present a stony facade of reserved poise to the world. However, while Tamar's somber composure came quite naturally to her, Telle's attempts to maintain an aloof exterior were often clumsy, transparent… and very cute!

Rain barely suppressed a smile.

Of course, that was only true if one knew her well. To a random

stranger, Telle of White Feather would appear as the personification of stark and severe Legacy pride — and to those who were unfortunate enough to find themselves on the other end of her sword, she would be like a cold and merciless nightmare.

…But that only made the haughty young woman more endearing.

Rain looked around and waved for a waiter.

Soon enough, the three of them were staring at beautifully served cocktails. Each was like a still life painting captured in a glass, decorated so exquisitely that drinking them seemed like an act of vandalism.

Telle looked at her two friends hesitantly.

"So… we're drinking alcohol?"

Despite her confident exterior, the beautiful Feather Knight was actually quite inexperienced in worldly matters. It was quite possible that she had never tried alcohol before, so she seemed unsure.

Tamar shrugged.

"I guess. I am confused, though. Why is there so much ice? It's more like we're drinking ice with a few drops of alcohol."

Rain looked at them with indignation.

"You guys don't understand anything! I thoroughly studied the gourmet section of the Bastion Gazette. This place is the most fashionable spot on the Lakefront Promenade these days, and these three cocktails are supposed to be sublime. They are themed after the fallen Sovereigns. See… these are the Bloody Queen, the Old Valor, and the Sweet Shadow."

Tamar's cocktail was bright red, Telle's nearly transparent with sharply cut ice cubes, while Rain's own was entirely black.

She grinned.

"There's also the fourth one, the White Flame, which is the most

popular… they make it with the best Beast Farm cream and strong spirits, so it's both smooth and fiery, warming the body and soothing the heart. Well, at least according to the Gazette. Anyway… cheers!"

They raised their glasses and clinked them gingerly. Then, each of the three girls tasted hers.

'Oh… so it's black because of coffee liqueur!'

Rain was pleased. The Sweet Shadow was, indeed, delicious... she decided to trust the Bastion Gazette from now on.

Tamar put her glass down and smiled... she did not smile often these days, so it was a rare and welcome sight.

"Oh, aren't congratulations in order? I saw the street lamps light up last night. You guys actually did it!"

Rain grinned.

"Sure did!"

Telle looked at them, took another sip of her cocktail, and sighed.

"I'm envious. You guys already have electricity… it will probably only reach the Chained Isles in a decade."

After the war, the paths of the three Awakened girls had forked in different directions.

The White Feather clan had regained their original demesne, so Telle returned to the Sanctuary of Noctis with her parents. She spent most of her time on the Chained Isles now, only returning to Bastion once every few months to represent her clan and conduct official business.

Tamar's fate, meanwhile, was almost exactly the opposite of Telle's. Her father, the Saint of Sorrow, had fallen in the final battle of the Realm War… humanity had lost many brave warriors on that dark day, and she was one of many who had lost friends and family to the ruthless crucible of battle.

Rain had wanted to stay by her friend's side for a while, but sadly,

Tamar did not receive a lot of time to grieve. As the only surviving child of the Saint of Sorrow, she had to assume responsibility over her clan — and in its darkest days, no less.

Tamar might have become the new Lady of Sorrow, but she was merely an Awakened. As such, she could not claim ownership of the ancestral Citadel of the Sorrow clan — and therefore, her family had to relinquish their lands to someone who could.

That someone was none other than Saint Seishan, the former commander of the Seventh Royal Legion. Seishan had treated the family of the former master of the Lake of Tears with respect, but although they were not forced to leave, they still chose to abandon their former domain.

Thus, Clan Sorrow became one of the many fallen noble families in the wake of the War.

…Of course, Rain knew Tamar well, so she was certain that her friend's clan would rise once again in the future. In fact, its reputation was already climbing up.

Tamar had joined the Shadow Clan first. Then, she participated in the tournament organized by the Fire Keepers and distinguished herself in the arena, defeating countless powerful Awakened in a most brutal and spectacular fashion. She performed well enough to end up in the final round, no less.

So, now, Tamar was somewhat of a double agent — granted, the forces she served were deeply allied instead of being hostile to each other. Officially, she was a rising star among the newer members of the Fire Keepers. Unofficially, though, she served as the Shadow Clan's team leader in Bastion… as well as Rain's personal bodyguard, on occasion.

Life was truly unpredictable sometimes.

As for Rain herself…

She had stayed in Godgrave for a while, then came here to Bastion to learn Shaping from Lady Nephis and civil engineering as a member of

Chief Bethany's team.

Oh… and somewhere along the way, she had also unsealed her Aspect.

Chapter-2292: Name Giver

Rain had really expected that her Aspect would reveal itself during the war… perhaps even at the last possible moment, in her most dire moment of need — so that she could turn the tables and save the day in the most dramatic fashion.

In hindsight, it could have never happened that way.

Rain was not quite sure how the world worked — no one was, really — but she could sense that there was subtle poetry to the nebulous crossroads of fate. People and their choices rhymed with each other… so did the circumstances that people could not control. So, in a sense, lives were like poems.

Not all of them were, of course, or at least not in equal measure. But the lives of those who wielded immense power or were exceptional in some regard usually were.

Rain did not wield immense power, and while she was somewhat special, she would not go as far as to call herself exceptional. True, she had achieved something astonishing once — she had become Awakened without relying on the cruel graces of the Nightmare Spell — but most of that accomplishment belonged to her brother, not herself.

Still, there seemed to be some poetic inclination to her life, as well.

And while the poem of her life described war and bloodshed, that was not its theme.

Her Flaw, the Crown of Thorns, proved as much.

What was the theme, then?

The conclusion of the Great War had been a confusing affair for Rain.

She had barely come to terms with the fact that she was a Legacy — a princess in the making, no different from Tamar. But then, in the blink of an eye, her brother betrayed everyone and died.

So, instead of a princess, she became the sister of a dead traitor… the most despicable villain in the world, no less.

Luckily, Rain was merely an Awakened, so she had not seen Lady Nephis strike her brother down herself — her sight was not keen enough for that. In fact, she did not know what had happened until much later, when Cassie's voice suddenly resounded in her mind, telling her not to worry.

She learned that her brother was alive, and only then that he was supposed to have died, as far as everyone was concerned. So, she did not even get an opportunity to feel worried about him.

And even more fortunately, no one really knew that Rain — or rather, Rani of the Seventh Royal Legion — was in any way connected to the Lord of Shadows.

In any case, the world started changing at a terrible speed after that. When everything was said and done, Rain decided to stay behind in Godgrave to participate in the construction of the road across the Collarbone Plain — the road that was supposed to connect the former Sword and Song Domains. She made that decision for no other reason than out of fondness for building things... not that it carried little weight.

In fact, it carried great weight, and she made that choice after contemplating what she wanted to do with her life both gravely and for a long time.

Rain was sick and tired of war, sick and tired of destroying things, and sick and tired of seeing things be destroyed.

So, she returned to her role as a member of a road construction crew — granted, this time, she was not a mundane laborer but an Awakened elite.

And it was when the construction of the road was finished a few

months later that her Aspect was suddenly unsealed — not on a battlefield, but in the middle of a construction site instead.

It was quite fitting, especially for someone whose Flaw made all her battle experience and years of bitter training more or less meaningless.

Rain had spent countless hours wondering what her Aspect would be, but in the end… it turned out far too odd for anyone to have guessed.

Honestly, it was unlike any other.

As an Awakened, Rain could command two Aspect Abilities now. She also had two pools of essence — a pool of soul essence, and a pool of spirit essence.

Her Dormant Ability allowed her to… give names to things. Or rather, Names — they were not quite True Names, but also not quite mundane ones, either. Because these Names were permanent, and wielded power of their own… a modest power, considering that she was merely an Awakened, but quite a real power nonetheless.

Bestowing a Name required a single-time infusion of spirit essence. The more spirit essence she infused, the more influence the Name would have on the Named object and the world itself.

The problem was that Rain had yet to figure out how to expand her pool of spirit essence. Despite that, by the time the road across Godgrave was finished, she had somehow managed to gather quite a lot of it — the sky of her Soul Sea, which had once been vast and clear, was entirely covered in stormy clouds by then, drops of rain falling to the surface of the restless sea in constant drizzle.

So, Rain infused all of that essence into the finished road, Naming it the Road of Shadows.

The skies of her Soul Sea cleared when she did, bright sunlight shone upon the glistening water once again... and something miraculous happened.

Before, her brother had taken his Citadel away — but he left the Shadow Realm Fragment, whatever that was, behind. As he explained

to her, he could control the Fragment a little as a Supreme, but not enough to make use of it where he was going.

The dome of impenetrable darkness sprawled at the center of the Collarbone Plain, covering a rough sphere dozens of kilometers across. When Rain gave the road a Name, though, it stirred, moving to stretch into a thin line that enveloped most of the road's length.

Just like that, the Road of Shadows became safe from the merciless radiance of the white abyss above Godgrave.

And Rain passed out from essence exhaustion, causing quite a stir among the members of the Shadow Clan hidden among the road builders to protect her.

In any case, it worked out great — sadly enough, Rain had not been able to achieve something quite as monumental again.

With the road across Godgrave built, Rain traveled to Bastion to participate in the construction of the Rivergate Dam and begin her lessons of Shaping.

She had been carefully experimenting with Names and trying to understand her own soul better all along. She discovered a few interesting things — for example, that giving Names in the runic language that the Nightmare Spell used was more efficient, consuming less spirit essence to achieve the same result.

Rain also discovered that Naming something that already possessed a True Name seemed to be impossible. She learned how to use her Awakened Ability better, as well.

Her Awakened Ability allowed her to assign descriptors to things — Epithets, as they were called. Unlike the Names, the Epithets were not permanent and only existed for as long as she could sustain them with her soul essence.

For example, she could assign an Epithet to a shield, making it the Indestructible Shield. As a result, the shield would become vastly more durable until Rain's essence ran out.

Actually, as an Awakened, she could assign two Epithets at the same

time. So, she could turn it into the Indestructible Magnetic Shield, making enemy weapons stick to its surface after failing to break it.

Of course, more powerful Epithets consumed more essence. The "indestructible" descriptor was more potent, but also more costly than the "durable" descriptor.

There were many factors affecting how potent and how expensive Epithets were, in fact.

For one, the more an Epithet conflicted with the nature of the thing, the more essence sustaining it consumed — so, making a shield extra durable was easier than making it brittle. Assigning Epithets to living beings was always more expensive, as well…

But Rain still could make a person attacking her an Immobile Person if she wished to, especially if she knew the person's name — or even better, their True Name. At least for a few moments, if their Rank was not too high.

In fact, assigning Epithets to things that had True Names or had been Named always cost less essence.

It worked the other way around, too — assigning True Names she had learned as Epithets consumed less essence and produced far greater results than simply using words of the human language.

For example, assigning the True Name of Burning to an enemy sword would easily melt it, while simply assigning it the "Burning" epithet would heat it up enough to make the enemy drop it, at best.

In that way, using her Awakened Ability was sometimes far more useful than using Shaping itself. After all, a Shaper had to speak the Names and channel them to perform sorcery — as soon as the sound of their voice fell to silence, the power of their sorcery would start to be dispelled. However, an Epithet remained in effect for as long as Rain had essence.

She could even sustain a few minor Epithets indefinitely, as long as she chose them wisely.

She could even assign Epithets to herself…

Rain took a sip of her cocktail and grinned at Telle and Tamar.

Her friends did not know, but she was not Promise of a Distant Sky at the moment.

In fact, she was Sober, Well-Rested Promise of a Distant Sky.

Granted, that second Epithet was devouring her essence at quite an appalling rate.

Even the combined power of her Aspect and Shaping were no match for Chief Bethany, it seemed.

Chapter-2293: Finer Things in Life

After the cocktails, it was time for the pastries.

The pastries were pretty and delicious — granted, they were not as delicious as what Rain was used to, having been pampered by her brother's pancakes and waffles. His repertoire was somewhat limited, though…

Enjoying a beautifully glazed eclair, Rain couldn't help but smile in delight.

'Should I introduce him to custard?'

Everything about this morning was wonderful. Their pretty clothes, the sophisticated interior of the cafe, the glistening vista of the Mirror Lake, the lavishly served cocktails, the delicate and delicious pastries…

'Ah, that is what I've been missing!'

Her later teenage years had been spent in Ravenheart, hunting down Nightmare Creatures. The city had been in the process of being built from the ground up back then, as well, populated mostly by displaced refugees. There had been a lot of work to be done, but not a lot of refined culture.

Later, Rain ended up on the frontline, and after the war was over, she spent her time among busy engineers and laborers.

The finer things in life had mostly escaped her until now, so she was enjoying the rare chance to feel like an actual girl for once. Plus, young cities in the Dream Realm had places like this one now, as well as theaters, operas, dancing halls, and much more. People wanted to

enjoy leisure and entertainment after working hard, so local leisure culture was developing swiftly.

Rain, Telle, and Tamar chatted lazily as new delicacies and pretty cocktails arrived.

"It feels strange, really. Now that there is no Crushing, the Chained Isles are completely different. It is much safer there, and we can actually fly as high as we want. Of course, the Nightmare Creatures feel just as liberated, so even those of them who used to stay in place are moving around. It's a proper mess, but once we cleanse the islands in the immediate vicinity of the Sanctuary, we will be ready to receive settlers…"

"They are working on building more flying ships. There are several thousands of Fire Keepers now, but only one Chain Breaker… sadly, while building a flying ship is not that hard, building one that is not going to turn to splinters at the first sign of danger is a big problem. So, not much luck on that front, for now. Our Spellsmiths are trying to create flying Echoes as a temporary measure, instead, but they are not creating them fast enough. Only the Masters get one."

"...Oh, I don't know. I am pretty busy these days. Right, have you heard, girls? Saint Thane is apparently working on a new version of Dreamscape, this one designed specifically for the Dream Realm. It is supposed to serve as a communication space between different cities, as well as a training tool to prepare mundane citizens for the First Nightmare."

Telle couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"Really? Oh! That would be wonderful. I love the Chained Isles, but being stuck all the way up north is so boring sometimes."

She sipped her cocktail, looking at the Mirror Lake with a distant expression on her exquisitely beautiful face, then turned to Rain and Tamar.

"Speaking of Nightmares…"

The festive mood turned a little somber all of a sudden.

The blonde girl hesitated for a few moments.

"I am thinking of challenging the Second Nightmare in no more than a year. What about you two?"

Although she did not ask directly, her underlying question was transparent. Telle was asking if they wanted to challenge the Second Nightmare with her.

For an Awakened, there was no question more intimate than that. There was also no clearer indication of how much the person trusted you.

Rain felt both touched and wistful.

She glanced at Tamar briefly, then smiled softly.

"Well… I can't, for various reasons. But Tamar was actually thinking the same."

Rain would have loved to challenge the Second Nightmare with Telle and Tamar… however, she was not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, and therefore, she couldn't.

She was walking a different path from them.

Tamar nodded calmly.

"Actually, I already have the core of the cohort assembled, including a healer… as well as a few people in mind I want to recruit. If you are not going to assemble a team out of retainers of your clan, then we will be happy to have you. After all, it is hard to find warriors of the same caliber as Telle of White Feather."

A corner of her mouth curled upward faintly.

Telle remained motionless for a moment, then cleared her throat to hide a shy smile.

"Oh… well, you aren't wrong. I am indeed quite formidable."

She hastily picked up her cocktail, took a long sip, and then added in

her usual calm tone:

"There is no one else in White Feather who can go into a Nightmare with me, at the moment. So… I am very interested in that cohort of yours, Tamar. Are they Fire Keepers, too?"

Tamar shook her head.

"No. But we… train together, I guess. And our instructor is a real devil."

Rain pretended to be busy with her glass.

Tamar was talking about the Shadow Clan, of course. It was no secret that her brother and his graceful Shadow, Saint, were preparing his subordinates for the dangers of the Second Nightmare. Tamar, Telle, Ray, and Fleur — two fearsome warriors, an elusive scout, and a healer. That was a good core for a cohort of challengers. With a few more talented people involved, they would stand a very good chance of becoming Masters.

'When will I become a master?'

Rain did not know, since things on that front were vague and progressing slowly.

She finished her cocktail, called a waiter, and smiled at him, making the young man blush.

"Can we get the check?"

Then, Rain looked at her friends and grinned.

"You do know what comes next, right?"

Tamar and Telle looked at each other with uncertainty.

"What?"

Rain sighed languidly.

'Ah, these sheltered Legacies...'

"...Shopping!"

Chapter-2294: An Eloquent Cavaliere

Despite the fact that Rain's current circumstances were far more unusual than those of her friends, unlike them, she had actually enjoyed a more normal childhood. Apart from that, she had more worldly experience — Telle and Tamar might have known how to navigate high society better, but for this elegant outing, Rain was their guide.

…And her guide was the Bastion Gazette.

Following the plan she had been meticulously researching since the last time Telle visited Bastion, they enjoyed a walk of the Lakefront Promenade, went on a humble shopping spree on the Fashion Street, and ended up in a park with her purchases safely stored in the Bag of Withholding.

Rain's mood was bright, and the weather was warm. The three of them rested on a bench and basked in the sunlight, enjoying the breeze.

Telle sighed.

"Why don't we go to a beach and swim a little?"

Tamar glanced at her, then shook her head.

"We can't go to a public beach. More precisely, we can't allow anyone to see Rain in a swimsuit — otherwise, we'll have to fend off a frenzied crowd of admirers. It'll be worse than Godgrave."

Rain laughed.

Tamar might have been joking, but she was also somewhat correct. If

the three of them donned swimwear and appeared on a public beach, it would probably cause quite a stir — after all, most people there were mundane.

Telle looked Rain up and down and sighed.

"...True."

Rain grinned.

"You two aren't so bad yourself. In fact, a couple of guys have been staring at us for the last ten minutes."

Tamar raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? Where?"

She seemed a little embarrassed — after all, she was supposed to be the bodyguard, and yet Rain noticed that someone had been watching them first.

There were indeed two young men not too far away, seemingly enjoying a picnic. They were not very obvious about it, but Rain had not missed the intense gazes the young men were throwing in their direction from time to time.

Telle looked around, then frowned. Her expression darkened a little.

"Oh. I think I know one of them. Let's… go somewhere else. Please?"

Neither Rain nor Tamar had any objections, so they left their bench and headed for the park exit.

The two young men just happened to catch up with them a minute later, though.

Rain looked at them with curiosity.

They were a little older than the three girls and seemed earnest enough. They were quite handsome, too… too handsome to be mundane or merely Awakened, even. Their figures were lean and athletic, and their light summer clothes did nothing to hide the

defined lines of their sculpted muscles.

She would not have minded sparing them a little time, but Telle's negative reaction had already created a bad first impression.

'Can this be...'

One of the young men smiled and bowed slightly.

"Greetings, fair ladies. I am deeply sorry if my friend and I are intruding upon your stroll, but we could not help but admire your sublime beauty from afar. Truly, it can only be compared to the alluring wonder of the Mirror Lake glistening under the radiant sun… fresh and vivacious, full of promise so enchanting that no honeyed words can describe…"

Rain blinked and stared at him with wide eyes.

'W—what is he saying?'

The other young man froze, then paled and furtively raised a hand to cover his face.

"...and thus, captivated and bewitched by the three breathtaking fairies that must have descended from heaven to illuminate this dolorous world with their youthful charm, we cannot help but hope that you would join us for a humble picnic. Please, I beg of you… will you bestow the precious gift of your sweet company upon us? My heart is like a bird trapped in a cage, beating wildly in anticipation!"

The strange guy finally finished speaking, looked at their startled expressions, and then added hurriedly:

"Oh! Forgive my lack of manners… I was so enamored by your stunning beauty that I forgot to introduce myself. I am Master Tristan, and this is my friend, Master Mercy."

'Ah… now, how do I refuse them politely?'

Rain blinked a couple of times, Telle shifted slightly, and Tamar just stared at the two young men with a deadpan expression.

A few moments later, she said dully:

"Tristan? You're Tristan of Aegis Rose?"

The young man beamed.

"So you've heard of me. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. The stories of my martial prowess have spread far and wide, after all!"

Tamar nodded.

"Oh, I think I killed a cousin of yours at Godheart."

The young man froze.

"P—pardon?"

Tamar studied him for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Well, who knows? I might have. I am Lady Tamar of Sorrow, formerly a centurion of the Seventh Royal Legion. And these are my friends…"

Tristan's expression changed.

"Seventh Royal Legion? Seventh Royal Legion?!"

The other young man opened his eyes wide and reached for his friend.

"Tristan, wait!"

But Tristan did not wait.

"The army of that dishonorable, diabolical wench, Seishan of Song? Bah! I take it back, then. I have to! My honor will not allow me to stay quiet! You are no fairy, my lady. You must be an evil seductress, instead!"

But before he could say anything else…

There was a loud sound, and Master Tristan was suddenly facing the other away, the silhouette of a delicate palm clearly imprinted on his

cheek.

Rain shook her hand in the air with a pained expression.

"Ouch!"

Her hand hurt, but she was satisfied. This was a full outing experience now!

Granted, it would have been better if the person she slapped was not a Master. Masters really had hard jaws.

Looking at the stunned Ascended, Rain smiled.

"That was not very chivalrous of you, don't you think, Master Tristan? After all, you approached us first… how can you call my friend a seductress?"

She shook her head.

"I am sorry, but we will have to refuse your invitation for a picnic. Now, if you'll excuse us…"

Giving the other Master a slight bow, she grabbed Telle and Tamar and dragged them away.

Rain waited until they were far enough away before exploding into laughter.

…Tristan and Mercy, meanwhile, were left behind to their own devices.

Tristan massaged his cheek, a confused expression on his face.

Did this slap... feel strangely familiar?

Eventually, he sighed and looked at Mercy with reproach.

"...The worst thing they can say is no, huh?"

Mercy took a deep breath, shook his head, and walked away in dejected silence.

Chapter-2295: Secret Lessons

Sadly, everything good had to come to an end.

After enjoying a fun and exciting morning out with Tamar and Telle, Rain bid them farewell. Tamar was on leave today, so she returned to the manor her family was renting in Bastion. Telle, meanwhile, had an appointment with the head of a merchant group that wanted to establish a trade caravan to the Chained Isles.

Rain herself changed out of her cute dress into the Puppeteer's Shroud. The dress, the pretty shoes, and the earrings went into the Bag of Withholding — a thermos full of steaming coffee came out instead, and she let out a deep sigh of satisfaction after taking a sip, her back leaning against a wall in a secluded alley.

A few moments later, her brother stepped out of the shadows and gave her a strange look.

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He lingered for a bit, then shook his head.

"No, it's nothing. Just… good job!"

That only made her more confused.

"With what?"

He grinned.

"Slapping that buffoon, of course! Ah, you really made your big brother proud… I guess it's true what they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree..."

Rain blinked a couple of times. Did her brother know that bizarre guy, Tristan? Well, in hindsight, that was only to be expected. The world of Legacies was quite small, after all, and the Aegis Rose clan was prominent. Telle seemed to be familiar with at least one of the two young Masters, too.

It was a bit concerning, though, to hear that she was starting to behave like Sunny.

That would be a disaster!

Only Sunny could pull off being Sunny.

Clearing her throat, she offered him her hand and smiled.

"In any case, I am ready to go."

He pulled her into the shadows, and a moment later, they were on the Ivory Island.

The emerald grass moved softly in the warm wind, and the sun was shining on the glistening surface of a small lake. The beautiful white pagoda rose into the sky behind them, embraced by the white bones of a dragon that coiled around it.

No matter how many times Rain visited the tranquil island, she could not help but feel a sense of awe. She could not help feeling out of place here, either, as if she was a mortal who had accidentally found her way into heaven.

Rain looked around carefully.

"We're outside?"

Her business on the Ivory Island was of a clandestine kind. So, her brother would usually bring her directly into the tower in order to avoid prying eyes.

He nodded.

"We had visitors earlier, but they have already departed. So, you can relax."

They headed toward the Tower of Hope at a comfortable pace. Before too long, Rain looked up and asked suddenly:

"By the way, I've always been curious… what is that dead dragon doing here?"

At first, she had simply assumed that everything on the Ivory Island was mysterious and mystical. But as she grew more familiar with the place, the sun-bleached bones of the great beast started to look out of place.

Her brother glanced at the ancient remains and smiled.

"Oh, him? His name was Sevras, the Ivory Lord. He was the ruler of a place called the Ivory City, a descendant of Sun God, and one of the seven immortal Saints who guarded the Demon of Hope. Well, before he went crazy and died."

Rain looked at her brother in surprise.

"Really? Wait, how do you know all of this?"

He lingered for a moment.

"Ah, well. Some people you know met him in their Second Nightmare. How do you think Nightingale got that fancy title of his, the Dragonslayer?"

Rain's eyes widened a little.

"Saint Kai? He killed this giant dragon?"

Her brother chuckled.

"Sure. Of course, he was not Saint Kai back then, merely Awakened Kai. That crazy fellow! He literally jumped into the dragon's maw to kill him. Nightingale… he might look like a softy, but let me tell you — that was not even the only dragon he has killed…"

He grew silent for a moment, then added in an incredulous tone:

"Now that I think about it, despite all that, he doesn't just look like a

softie — he is a softie. A dragon-slaying softie. What a paradox."

Rain giggled and looked at her brother sideways.

"Oh? Just out of curiosity, how many dragons did you kill?"

He frowned, remained silent for a while, and then confessed reluctantly:

"None. I did get into a fistfight with a dragon once, though…"

She groaned.

'Why did I even ask?'

Soon enough, they arrived in a spacious chamber on one of the higher floors of the Ivory Tower. Lady Nephis was waiting there, looking outside the window.

Hearing them enter, she looked around and smiled.

"Rain."

Rain bowed respectfully, momentarily blinded by her breathtaking beauty.

"Teacher."

Lady Nephis sighed.

"I told you not to be so formal. Just call me big sister…"

Rain paled a little.

"I—I wouldn't dare! How can I call you that, Teacher? You are a Sovereign!"

Her brother stared at her, mouth agape.

"Hey, hey… wait a second. I am a Sovereign, too! How come you have no problem calling me Big Brother? As well as all kinds of other, far less flattering things!"

Rain and Nephis both looked at him silently.

Right. Her brother was a Sovereign, too.

She scrunched her face for a moment.

'Well, it's his own fault! Who told him to act so… unsovereignly?'

Lady Nephis, Sunny, and Rain… the relationship between the three of them was a bit odd.

Rain knew that her brother and the beautiful goddess of humanity were an item. To be honest, she was more than a little bit proud of him in that regard. Way to go, brother! Of all the astonishing deeds he had accomplished, charming the beautiful Changing Star — quite literally the most outstanding woman in the world — was perhaps the most outrageous.

At the same time, it also felt rewardingly fitting. Who else was good enough for her brother, after all?

Nobody!

Meanwhile, Rain and Lady Nephis had shared a brief connection in the past, as well. Lady Nephis even seemed to remember her… she also knew that Rain was her partner's disciple.

However, Sunny was keeping the fact that Rain was his sister a secret, for some reason. At least that was how it seemed… sometimes, it felt like Lady Nephis was aware that they were family, but sometimes, it felt like she was not.

Rain had tentatively tried to bring it up in the past, but to no avail.

In any case, she could not bring herself to act informally around her stunning sister-in-law.

"Shall we begin the lesson?"

Luckily, Lady Nephis saved her from having to answer. Her brother sighed and left them, saying that he would come pick up Rain in a few hours.

The lesson started.

Lady Nephis looked at Rain calmly.

"Your channeling has become sufficiently stable now, Rain. You are progressing very fast… so, starting today, I will teach you Names that are far more dangerous than what we have learned so far. These Names can destroy a Shaper if the Shaper loses control of them, so you must never waver while invoking them…"

Rain listened, her eyes glistening with lively interest.

Chapter-2296: Teaching and Learning

Rain knew that she had a talent for the Sorcery of Names. In fact, she was more or less born to be a Shaper.

Humans all spoke the same language these days, but before the Dark Times, people of Earth had spoken all kinds of them. Pieces of these languages still remained, passed down among family members for generations, and academics had to learn the basics of a few if they wished to study the past. Of course, there were powerful machines capable of translating ancient texts for them, as well.

Then there was the Dream Realm and the Nightmare Spell, which translated the dead languages of the fallen civilizations for the Awakened. There was the language that the Nightmare Spell itself used, too.

Rain had not understood why her brother insisted on teaching her these dead languages, but in hindsight, it was a very useful skill to have.

She had noticed that many of the Dream Realm languages were similar to each other a long time ago… almost as if they shared a common source. The runic language of the Nightmare Spell was the closest to that source, but it was still merely an adaptation of it.

Having studied Shaping for a while now, Rain had come to believe that there was one true language out there, woven into the very fabric of existence… a language where every word was a True Name.

The language of the gods.

Unlike the human languages, which had been invented, this one was inherent to reality, both shaped by the world and shaping the world.

Therefore, speaking the words of that language was no different from reshaping the world.

That was what Shapers did.

By channeling True Names and assembling them into Verses, they could change the world in accordance with their will.

…However, not just anyone could become a Shaper.

The knowledge of True Names was esoteric and lost. Anyone could learn the True Names as long as they found one, though… and yet, very few could actually speak them.

After all, these Names were never meant to be spoken by a human. They were meant to be spoken by the gods.

Most people simply did not have the talent to master the True Names, but rare individuals like Rain and Lady Nephis could, to a degree. Still, it wasn't easy.

The True Names were… elusive. Even learning one did not mean that you could know it. The knowledge of a True Name was effervescent, straining to erase itself, as if something that was not supposed to be retained by a human mind — like an object placed into an ill-fitting vessel.

Speaking the True Names was difficult, too. Even if one had the talent, they had to practice relentlessly in order to realize it.

Then, there was the act of invoking the True Names itself — channeling them required a deep well of endurance, soul power, and a firm will. Faltering during an invocation could not only ruin the sorcery, but also harm the sorcerer.

And finally, there was the process of assembling the Verses. That aspect of Shaping was not particularly hard or punishing, but demanded a lot of creativity from the Shaper. That was the part Rain enjoyed the most.

Lady Nephis was the only other Shaper she knew, and it was interesting to see how different their talents were. Overall, Rain

judged herself to be a more talented Shaper… which did not mean that she was a more powerful one, though.

Due to her innate Attribute, [Poet], Rain could learn and speak True Names easily. Building Verses came naturally to her, as well. However, Lady Nephis was… indomitable. Once she learned a True Name, that Name could never escape her — therefore, she carried an astonishingly broad library of them in her mind.

And while Rain had an easier time speaking the Names, her teacher could channel them much more effectively due to how uncompromising her will was.

Rain was not really sure, but she strongly suspected that neither of them was an ordinary Shaper. True Shapers of the ancient past could neither have invoked the Sorcery of Names as easily as Rain could nor have known as many Names as Lady Nephis knew, most likely.

Therefore, they would have probably been astonished by the speed with which both of them were absorbing Shaping.

Today's lesson was, honestly, a bit terrifying. The True Names Lady Nephis spoke were so violent and destructive that Rain wasn't sure she could channel them without annihilating her own soul. Her teacher, of course, had no such problem — there did not exist a Name that Lady Nephis would not dare invoke, and no Name she would fail to tame.

After a while, Rain was covered in sweat and trembling from exhaustion. Her essence was on the verge of running out.

"Let us finish here."

Nodding, Rain collapsed on the floor. There was no furniture in the spacious chamber, but she was happy to feel the cool touch of the stone plates.

After a while, she sat up and smiled.

"...I am not sure I will ever need to speak such terrible Names, teacher. After all, I want to be a builder, not a natural disaster."

Lady Nephis smiled faintly.

"Creation and destruction are two sides of the same coin, Rain. You can't neglect one if you want to master the other."

Rain frowned a little, contemplating her words.

Well… it made sense. If she wanted to build a bridge, she had to know all the ways in which the bridge could collapse — otherwise, she wouldn't be able to design it solidly enough to weather the burden of its own weight.

Still, she didn't want to focus on learning True Names that could be of use in a battle too much.

Rain lingered for a while, then summoned the Bag of Withholding and pulled out a stack of paper, each page filled with neat, pretty handwriting.

"Here is the new revision."

She touched her hair in embarrassment.

"I… I did my best to expand on the points you asked for. It is a bit hard to put into words, though. I am sorry."

Lady Nephis took the papers from her, studied them briefly, and nodded.

"Thank you, Rain."

Her expression grew a little wistful.

After a few moments of silence, Lady Nephis sighed.

"You must be curious about how things are going, right?"

Rain would lie if she said that she wasn't.

In truth, she had come to Bastion not only to learn.

She had also come here to teach.

The knowledge of how to Awaken naturally was too precious to keep for herself. Rain was the only person — for now — who had managed to not only Awaken, but also unseal her Aspect and Flaw without the help of the Nightmare Spell. If she could teach other people how to achieve the same, far fewer of them would have to face the First Nightmare… and far fewer of them would die.

Like the first child of her parents had.

Lady Nephis and Cassie wished to see more Awakened in the world, as well, so they promised to support Rain fully. Due to the inherent danger of reshaping the very foundation of the world, her identity was kept secret for now, and the Immortal Flame clan served as her proxy in this endeavor.

They were proceeding carefully. At this stage, only a select number of volunteers had been chosen to attempt natural Awakening in secret — people of various ages, backgrounds, and professions, all united by the shared desire to help humanity grow stronger.

But things were progressing slowly.

It had taken Rain four years to Awaken, but she was a pioneer. Those who would follow in her footsteps were supposed to enjoy a faster journey, and yet none of the volunteers were showing great results.

Lady Nephis shook her head slightly.

"None of them have learned to control their soul essence yet, let alone attempted to form a soul core. However, there is good news as well. Two volunteers are now showing initial signs of being able to sense their essence — a promising result, to say the least. I am sure we will have our first success eventually."

She looked into the window.

"Of course, by now, we have no choice but to admit that natural Awakening will never be as fast as the path offered by the Nightmare Spell. And the Awakened who do emerge that way in the future would most likely never be as fearsome as those forged and tempered by the Spell. Still, their power will supplement the power of

humanity just as well… we just have to be mindful of the cost."

The easiest way to help a mundane person Awaken naturally was to let them absorb soul shards of Awakened Nightmare Creatures. However, there were more and more carriers of the Nightmare Spell in the world these days, and all of them needed to saturate their cores in order to reach the pinnacle of their power.

So, natural Awakening did promise to produce a tectonic shift in the fate of humanity — however, it was not a panacea to the problems that plagued it.

Lady Nephis looked at the papers in her hand and smiled softly.

"Still — thank you, Rain. One day in the future, when the world becomes kind enough, children will not have to become fearsome warriors anymore. When that day comes, this effort of yours will save countless lives. No words can express my gratitude."

Rain looked away and blushed.

"T—that… that is alright! All I did was hunt a few Nightmare Creatures with big brother's help, fall into a canyon, and trek across a muddy plain. It was not a big deal…"

Lady Nephis chuckled quietly and patted Rain on the shoulder.

"I hope you didn't include this observation in your notes. We wouldn't want our volunteers to start jumping into random canyons, would we?"

Chapter-2297: A Night in Bastion

The sun was already setting above Bastion by the time Nephis returned to her spacious chamber at the pinnacle of the Ivory Tower. The horizon was burning with a beautiful conflagration of red and golden hues, while the sky above the Mirror Lake had already turned a deep shade of indigo, countless stars glistening on its satin canvas like silver jewels.

The pale disc of the full moon was already rising, too…

The shadows had grown deep and vague, embracing the world.

As Nephis walked to the balcony and looked down, Sunny rose from her shadow and hugged her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Long day?"

Nephis inhaled deeply, then let out a long sigh.

"...Yeah."

Both of them watched the reflection of the moon move across the surface of the water in silence. After a while, Sunny tightened his embrace a little.

"You can rest easy tonight. I am keeping watch."

In truth, Nephis did not always stay in Bastion. Most of her time was spent on various battlefields — in the nebulous waters of the Stormsea, in the dreadful reaches south of Godgrave, in the lethal cold of the frozen hell west of Ravenheart. If not there, she was leading humanity to war in the waking world, even if the world itself

suppressed her powers and rejected her presence.

She was fighting hard to postpone the collapse of human civilization on Earth and prepare the Dream Realm for the arrival of countless refugees who would flee their dying world. Above all else, she was relentlessly searching for more Citadels — those of them that had not been discovered and conquered yet, all in order to empower the Human Domain as much as she could and pave the way for the human Sovereigns who would come in her wake.

Sunny was fighting, too, albeit in a more clandestine manner.

But every month, when the full moon rose above Bastion, both Nephis and Sunny had to be here.

That was because the Cursed Demon they had unleashed upon the true Mirror Lake to stop Mordret was still there, hidden in reflections. It stayed safely contained on the other side of the Great Mirror most of the time, but on these few days when the boundary between the two versions of Bastion grew thin, its dark influence sometimes escaped the reflection of the moon.

That was why they had to keep watch.

Nephs put her hands on his and leaned back a little in his firm embrace, allowing herself to be supported by his body.

"I am not that tired. I slept well last night..."

As Supremes, they did not have to sleep every night, or even often… in theory. However, Nephis was under constant strain because of her Flaw, so Sunny encouraged her to rest and recuperate as much as her impossibly busy schedule allowed.

As the last light of day was drowning in the encroaching darkness, she asked:

"How did your battle go?"

Sunny chuckled.

"It went fine, I guess. I managed to kill one of the Tyrants, so I will

get to their nests soon. However… my Shell was dismantled in no time. I was completely overwhelmed. Even though I was stronger than any individual abomination there, and none of them possessed a will more firm than mine, the collective willpower of the swarm was like a dark tsunami. The more I moved, the more it felt like I was drowning in a mire. It was as if a great weight was pulling me down, making my steps slower and my arms weaker. Even though I could cut them, I struggled to land my strikes."

Nephis remained silent for a while, then said thoughtfully:

"It is probably because you wield your Will like a blade."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

She considered her words for a moment.

"I only realized it recently, but the Will… it is not a uniform force. Rather, everyone wields their own version of it. Your will, Sunny, is especially biased. It is built entirely around your killing intent — I am not even sure if there is a difference between the two. So, you wield your Will like a weapon."

He chuckled.

"What is wrong with that? What happened to 'the essence of combat is murder'?"

Nephis smiled softly.

"It is murder, not a weapon. The sword you wield is important, but so is the hand that holds it. Ultimately, the true weapon is your body… what I mean to say is that you should wrap your will around your entire self, not just infuse your blade with it. That way, you might find it easier to move even when facing an overwhelming foe."

Sunny thought about it.

Will was a force, and like any other force, there was a difference between simply wielding it and wielding it effectively. That

difference was technique. Both he and Nephis were novices in that area, so they often shared their insights and helped each other improve.

'I should not be too biased toward killing in order to be a better murderer, huh?'

He smiled, amused by the contradiction.

"I'll try it the next time I have a chance."

Then, Sunny pulled her back gently.

"Come inside. Even if you are not going to sleep, at least meditate a little. With what is happening in the Western Quadrant, you will most likely have to return to the East. We both know how draining it is to linger at home."

They returned to the chamber and soon found themselves on a sofa, his hands still wrapped around her waist. Nephis relaxed, closing her eyes, while Sunny stared at the wall.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she asked:

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Me? Oh… I was just thinking how boring our lives have gotten."

Nephis shifted and looked up at him, her grey eyes glinting with a hint of amusement.

"Boring? Our lives?"

He nodded.

"Well, true, we are probably the busiest people in the world — two worlds, even. Apart from Cassie, that is. But thinking back to how I lived before becoming Awakened, actually, there was much more entertainment involved. Bread and circuses, right? Free food and entertainment — that has been the formula for pacifying a restless

population from before the Dark Times. Only it's synthpaste and network comics now, I suppose. The government wisely made both easily accessible even to people in the outskirts."

Sunny let out a sigh.

"But when was the last time we read a fun book, enjoyed a comic, swooned over a drama, or watched a movie? I can't even remember. Most of these things can't even be done in the Dream Realm… granted, we seem to have electricity now. Who knows? Maybe there will be a movie theater in Bastion soon, or at least a radio station."

Nephis studied him for a few moments, then smiled and closed her eyes again.

"There might not be a movie theater in Bastion, but there are plenty of theaters. There are also printing presses in most Citadels now — nobody has published a novel yet, but there are already newspapers and magazines. Some are even publishing serials. Oh… and there will be the Dreamscape here soon, too. As long as we can figure out how to ward off the horrors who keep invading it."

She paused for a moment, then added wistfully:

"But I get what you mean. To be honest, I can't remember the last time I simply listened to music, either. A radio station… having a radio station would be nice…"

Sunny laughed quietly.

"Three billion people are pouring their longing onto you, but little do they know, all their goddess wants is to be able to fangirl over her favorite idols in peace from the safety of her heavenly island…"

Nephis smiled sleepily.

"Yeah… that'd be great…"

Sunny remained motionless for a bit, then carefully unwrapped his hands from around her and reached into the shadows. Instead of a sword, however, what he pulled out of them this time was a black flute.

Bringing it to his lips, he blew into it tentatively and then placed his fingers on its smooth body.

Soon, a soothing melody spread across the chamber gently, lulling Nephis to sleep.

Night settled over Bastion. Sunny continued to play the flute while watching over the city below.

Somewhere in the city, Rain was sleeping soundly, having shunned her dormitory bunk for the lavish guest room of Tamar's family manor.

Beth and Quentin were having a romantic dinner on the deck of a restaurant boat.

Effie and her husband were tucking Little Ling to sleep.

Sunny's thoughts were peaceful and lazy.

'I might not be Night of Night&Gale, but if she wants to listen to music, I can make her wish come true.'

And speaking of Kai…

Back in the waking world, he was about to meet the dashing Saint for the first time in a long while.

Then, the two of them would go on an adventure.

'Ah, it will be like the good old times. Nothing bad or terrible will happen, I am sure…'

Chapter-2298: Memory Lane

Now a demigod, Sunny returned to the outskirts of NQSC once again.

Standing in a desolate alleyway formed by the crumbling walls of decrepit buildings, he inhaled the toxic air deeply and grimaced. The smell was definitely nostalgic, but he did not feel welcome here.

Not only because the outskirts had changed just as thoroughly as he had, but also because the world itself was rejecting him.

Sunny exhaled slowly, struggling with the uncomfortable feeling of being out of place. His powers were severely suppressed, and every breath he took was a struggle. A strange lethargy enveloped his mind, making him numb and drowsy. Worst of all, he could feel the very fabric of reality straining to push him out — so, he had to consciously will himself to stay in place every single moment.

It was like the familiar action of pulling on his tether to travel between worlds, only extended in perpetuity. If he relaxed his grip even for a second, he would be banished back to the Dream Realm.

Sunny was not in pain, but he still wanted to groan.

'How… disheartening…'

Even if he had never harbored any affection for the outskirts, feeling like an unwelcome guest in his own homeworld felt a little bitter. Sunny was pretty sure that he was the only man from the slums of NQSC to have become Supreme… so, shouldn't his return here have been a triumph?

In any case, he was wary. The outskirts were different now — this area in particular was completely abandoned in the wake of the Dream Realm resettlement. There were no people around, which meant that other things could have made their nests in the desolate

concrete jungle.

Sunny was not powerless in his current state, but he was definitely far more vulnerable than he would be in the Dream Realm.

It was quite interesting, actually. Both Sunny and Nephis experienced the rejection of their homeworld differently from how most other Supremes would, and were on the opposite ends of the spectrum to boot.

For Sunny, it was much harder to stay here — that was because he carried his entire Domain within his soul, and therefore, the laws governing the waking world rebelled against his burdensome presence with extra fury.

However, for Nephis, it was actually much easier to stay on Earth than it would have been for other Supremes. That was because of her original Attribute, Dreamspawn, which made her a being innately connected to both worlds.

Nevertheless, she could not unleash her powers freely here, either… simply because of how devastating and destructive they were.

The waking world was intricate and fragile, its damaged ecosystem brittle — if Nephis was not careful with how she used her Aspect, she could shatter entire continents, cause towering tidal waves that would wash human settlements off the face of the earth, usher in an endless winter by obscuring the sun with billowing clouds of ash, and initiate devastating chains of supervolcanic eruptions that would boil the oceans and fracture the land.

So, even if the world was not suppressing Neph's power as much, she had to keep it contained herself.

'I wonder if either of us will be able to return here at all if we become Sacred.'

Sunny suspected that his days of visiting the waking world, at least, would be over forever.

Leaning against the wall, he sighed deeply.

"When is he coming?"

Just then, there was the sound of footsteps, and a tall figure entered the alley, looking around with curiosity.

It was Kai, wearing a ridiculously fitting ensemble of stylish designer clothes, his magnetic green eyes and auburn hair standing out in the morose bleakness of the outskirts like a bright beacon.

Noticing Sunny, he hesitated for a moment, then smiled amicably.

"Oh! Hello there, young man. You must be a member of the Shadow Clan… please, take me to your lord. We have an appointment."

Sunny stared at him in confusion.

'What… is this fool going on about?'

Then, it dawned on him.

Kai had never seen the Lord of Shadows without a mask — and unlike Effie, who resided in Bastion, he had never encountered Master Sunless either. So, he must have imagined what every new recruit of the Shadow Clan imagined when entering the Dark Castle for the first time… a sinister, cold, and arrogant tyrant sitting on a throne of bones.

Instead, he met Sunny, who was younger than him by a few years, and looked even younger still due to his modest stature, slender build, and porcelain skin.

Kai suddenly leaned forward a little and looked at Sunny with wide eyes.

"Uh… I am sorry, b—but… may I ask what skin products you use? The climate in Ravenheart is too harsh, so I've been really struggling..."

Sunny stared at him silently, hiding how dumbfounded he was.

'What?'

That was what Kai wanted to know? And more than that... wasn't he a Transcendent? What Saint would go around worrying about skin products? Were there even skin products for Saints?!

Eventually, Sunny said in an even tone:

"You may."

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"Pardon?"

Sunny looked at him for a few more moments, then smiled.

"I mean, you may ask. My skincare routine is a bit convoluted, though! Listen carefully: first, you need to find a suit of armor forged by the Prince of the Underworld. Then, you need to kill about seven thousand Nightmare Creatures while wearing that armor to bind it to your soul. The rest is pretty straightforward — you just need to conquer the Second and Third Nightmares, which you already have covered, and then attain Supremacy. That is the secret of how to get glowing, dewy skin like mine."

Kai stared at him with wide eyes.

After a while, he mumbled in a hesitant tone:

"He's… he's not lying?"

Sunny grinned.

"Of course, I am not. I am the most honest man in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

Then, he raised a hand and patted the taller man on the shoulder.

"I'm the Lord of Shadows, by the way. You can call me Sunny."

Chapter-2299: Name of the Shadow

Looking at the dazed expression on Kai's face, Sunny couldn't help but smile.

'Ah, yes. This is it. This is the feeling!'

He had been right. This adventure was going to be just like the good old days…

Ignorant of the quiet satisfaction Sunny was feeling, Kai finally managed to shake off his confusion. He remained silent for a few moments, then asked in a tone of pure bewilderment:

"Sunny? Your name is… Sunny?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Well, I guess it's technically a nickname. Why?"

Kai blinked a couple of times, then smiled slightly.

"No, it's just… a bit ironic, considering that you are the Lord of Shadows. Not the kind of name I would have expected the Lord of Shadows to have."

Sunny gave him a strange look.

"You didn't really think that when I was born, my mom gave me one look and went… oh, your name will be the Lord of Shadows! Did you?"

Kai tilted his head a little, a thoughtful look on his face.

A few moments later, he sighed dejectedly.

"Now that you say it, it does sound preposterous. But somehow, that seems to be exactly what I thought. How stupid of me."

He smiled.

"Not that I gave the matter of your birth a lot of thought… I just sort of imagined you crawling out of a dark cave as a fully formed adult or being born in a sinister dark temple somewhere in the Dream Realm. Stuff like that."

Sunny stared at him, lost for words.

"...I was born in a rundown public hospital a few blocks away from here. It was a completely normal birth."

Seeing Kai nod in understanding, Sunny thought for a moment, then added nonchalantly:

"Well, to be fair, a huge shadow did swallow the sun the moment I was born, plunging the entire world into darkness. But that kind of stuff happens all the time, right?"

Total solar eclipses were not that rare, after all.

Kai fell deathly silent, for some reason...

It seemed that astronomy wasn't his strong suit!

Sunny glanced at him and shrugged.

"If it makes you feel any better, my full name is Sunless."

The charming Saint suddenly seemed much more at ease.

"Ah! Supreme Sunless. That sounds far more fitting."

Then, he gave Sunny a long look and added hesitantly:

"But, I must admit… I did hear a few things about how you really look from Effie, and yet, to think that you would hide such a face behind a mask, Sunless! That mask really doesn't do you justice. So many things are making sense now!"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Like what?"

Kai smiled.

"Well, uh... this and that. Shall we go now?"

Sunny shrugged and grabbed his shoulder.

"Sure… let's go."

Kai concentrated, pulling on his tether. A cold wind suddenly blew across the alleyway, toppling a pile of garbage nearby.

And then… nothing happened.

Sunny looked at Kai with a silent question, prompting him to cough in embarrassment.

"That… I am sorry. It seems like I can't carry you to the Dream Realm. It feels like trying to move a mountain."

It made sense, in hindsight. It would have already been hard for a Saint to transport a Sovereign across the realm boundary. But Sunny was also carrying tens of thousands of shades, many of them of the Supreme Rank, within his soul — not to mention the Sacred shade of Condemnation. It was no surprise that Kai couldn't carry his weight.

Shaking his head, Sunny sighed.

"That's a bit inconvenient."

Kai seemed genuinely concerned.

"So… will you have to traverse the Hollow Mountains? Or bring your entire Citadel to Ravenheart?"

"Not really."

Kai let out a relieved sigh.

"Thank the… wait. Who said that?!"

He spun around and looked at a second Sunny who had appeared out of shadows a moment prior. The newcomer raised a hand in greeting, then placed it on Kai's other shoulder.

Soon enough, the three of them were standing in a secluded ravine in the wilderness outside Ravenheart. The second Sunny gave them a somber look, then turned away.

"Well, I'll be off."

A moment later, he was gone, disappearing into the shadows.

Sunny looked around with a curious expression.

"Huh. The fields are this close, already?"

Kai, meanwhile, stared at him with a distant expression.

"Lord of Shadows… Sunless… Sunny. What just happened?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, distracted by observing their surroundings.

"Oh, that? It was just a different incarnation of mine. Actually, I have seven tethers spread around the Dream Realm. This guy is still tethered in Ravenheart, even though he's mostly staying in Bastion these days. So, he brought us here and left… poor bastard! Now, he'll either have to get Cassie to bring him back or travel all the way to the Mirror Lake on foot."

Then, he added in a grumbling tone:

"But that's the least that punk deserves! Out of all of us, he has the nicest job."

Staying with Nephis and relaxing on the Ivory Island. Even though that avatar was merely a part of Sunny, Sunny still envied him… himself.

Kai blinked a couple of times, slowly digesting what he heard. Then, he frowned suddenly.

"Wait… but if you had a tether in Ravenheart, then why did you ask me to pick you up in NQSC?"

Sunny gave him a dubious look.

"Because I could? Listen, Nightingale… the logistics of operating seven bodies at the same time are no joke. The least you can do is make my life a little easier."

Kai seemed thoughtful for a few moments, then nodded.

"That must be tough. I am sorry… I must say I am surprised, though, to know that one of your incarnations has been tethered in Ravenheart all this time."

Sunny shrugged.

"Why not? I lived here for four years."

Kai seemed surprised.

"You did?"

Sunny smiled, then nodded.

"Sure. I even watched a majestic dragon fly across the sky from time to time."

Kai coughed.

"Oh… I see. It's a bit strange, though — as you know, I have great eyesight. I think I would have noticed someone like you looking at me."

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, I was living in the shadow of a mundane girl back then. I only ever came out when no one was watching."

Noticing that Kai was looking at him with a strange expression, he frowned.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Kai let out a long sigh, then shook his head.

"It's… nothing. Are we going to take a look at the volcano first?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. You can fly there… I'll follow."

With that, he dismissed his human manifestation and hid himself in Kai's shadow.

Kai shivered, for some reason, and then forced out a pale smile.

"Oh… alright. Make yourself at home... I guess."

With that, he rose into the air and flew toward the fuming volcano.

Chapter-2300: First Intern

Teasing Kai was fun. It felt warm and familiar, so much so that Sunny even managed to forget that he was forgotten, for a while. He felt like he had gained his friend back once again…

But at the same time, it was also faintly bitter. Just as bitter as being around Effie and Jet felt… and Cassie, as well, to a lesser extent.

And even though the sweetness hid the bitterness most of the time, so did being with Nephis.

Hiding in Kai's shadow, Sunny reflected on his strange existence.

Did it even matter if the people he cared about remembered him?

He was still with them. He was still there to help and protect those he wanted to protect. Some of the new relationships he had built with them were no less meaningful than what they had been in the past… almost.

But it all felt incomplete.

Even though Sunny wanted to deny it, he could not close his eyes to the truth.

A more enlightened person might have been satisfied with simply being by their side, but Sunny was greedy. His avarice knew no bounds. He wanted to be known, remembered… and loved.

However, the cold hard truth was etched into his heart, no matter how much he wanted to deceive himself.

It was just as what he had realized back there, on the shattered battlefield in Godgrave, after learning that being worshiped and loved by humanity would become its doom.

Nobody could truly love him… because nobody could truly know him.

'Ah. How come I am suddenly in such a somber mood?'

In truth, Sunny did not feel the bitterness most of the time. He did not feel like an outsider when spending time with Rain or weaving elaborate schemes with Cassie. He did not feel like the affection Nephis felt for him was insincere… even if it was not quite as deep as the affection he felt for her. He was still the first, one, and only man in her heart.

His fateless life was not at all unpleasant.

So it was strange to find himself falling into the whirlpool of negative thoughts all of a sudden.

But really, Sunny knew why.

It was because of what Eurys had told him about the Apotheosis. Because for the first time in a long while, he had been forced to acknowledge the inevitability of the choice he would have to make.

Regain his fate or refuse it.

Bind himself to someone, or remain free from everyone.

'Freedom… is a lonely place, I guess.'

"Sunless?"

Sunny belatedly noticed that Kai had already reached the crater of the great volcano. Rising from the shadows, he felt a fiery heat caress his skin and waved a hand, trying to dispel the suffocating smoke that surrounded them.

He could taste ash on his tongue.

Frowning, Sunny manifested the Jade Mantle and hid his face behind a helmet.

"So, there were seismic anomalies coming from below?"

Kai had summoned his ivory armor.

"Yes. I've been told that you can sense what is happening deep inside the volcano. Oh… I've been told that I'll need to accompany you on a clandestine mission, as well. I'd feel better if we ensured the safety of the city first."

Sunny nodded.

"I can indeed perceive things from great distances. Let's get closer to the main shaft first."

As they ventured to descend lower into the crater, he asked:

"Can't you see through things, though? Why didn't you just peer into the depths of the volcano yourself?"

Kai hesitated for a few moments.

"I did. But then I stopped… fearing that whatever dwells there will feel me watching."

Most of his face was obscured by a helmet now, but Sunny could still tell that Kai smiled.

"Please don't misunderstand… I am ready to face and destroy that creature. But destroying it without causing an eruption or an earthquake that would damage the city might prove problematic. Having a Supreme nearby seemed like a wise precaution."

Kai paused, then asked carefully:

"As for that mission we are supposed to accomplish… might I inquire about its nature? As well as why you would require my assistance with it."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"We'll be searching for something in the Jade Palace. I am not entirely sure what that object is, but recovering it will probably involve some measure of danger."

He remained silent for a moment, then added calmly:

"As for why you need to help me out personally — well, first of all, I am not omnipotent. I may require assistance. More importantly, though, it is a chance for the two of us to spend time together."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"And do the two of us… need to spend time together?"

Sunny chuckled.

"That depends on you, really. Think of it as an internship."

Before Kai could ask, he explained the issue in more detail:

"You should know by now that a couple of Supremes will not be able to protect humanity once the true crisis comes. Nephis and I will have to attempt Apotheosis sooner rather than later… meaning that we will have to challenge the Fifth Nightmare, most likely. However, there is no guarantee that we will survive. Even if we do, conquering it is bound to take considerable time."

His expression darkened.

"But things are already this bad, and they'll only get worse in the future. As the only Supremes defending humanity at the moment, we can't abandon our responsibilities and disappear. So… new Supremes will have to rise before we attempt to become Sacred."

Kai contemplated his words in silence, then asked somberly:

"...I guess you are telling me this because I am a candidate."

Sunny nodded.

"Who else? You, Jet, Effie, Cassie… maybe some of the Song sisters or Morgan, if we can find where she is. But the four of you first and foremost. If you are willing, of course."

Kai laughed quietly.

"I don't think we have a choice. Or rather, we made that choice a long time ago. So, yes… I can't speak for others, but I am willing. Even if it kills me."

Sunny gave him a long look.

"That's great. However, the point is to make sure that it doesn't kill you. So, that's why you get an exclusive adventure with the world's most handsome Supreme."

Kai smiled.

"None of us have seen the one on the moon yet, so technically, we don't know who the most handsome Supreme is."

Sunny looked at him with a scandalized expression.

"Listen. I know that we are best friends… but that was a profound betrayal…"

Kai seemed to flinch, then mumbled in a stifled tone:

"He does know it… he believes that he knows it? Is he immune to my Flaw?!"

Sunny laughed.

Soon, they reached the edge of an abyssal, smoke-filled shute. Somewhere far below, an angry glow was painting the world red. Sunny closed his eyes for a moment and extended his shadow sense down… down and down, into the depths of the earth.

Soon enough, his expression changed subtly.

"There's a creature down there, alright. Nothing too terrible, though… feels like a Corrupted Tyrant. Killing it quietly should not prove a problem."

He hesitated for a few moments, then sighed.

"Feels like a downgrade, really. The last time I went for a swim in a volcano, I was hugging a Corrupted Titan."

Kai just gave him a silent stare.

Eventually, he simply forced out:

"Oh. I… hope you cut that creature down, Sunless."

Sunny shook his head.

"Cut it down? No, not that one…"

He stretched, as if preparing to dive down.

"That one, I gnawed to death with my teeth."

Leaving stunned Kai behind, he jumped into the dark chasm.

Chapter-2301: Blessed Land

Eventually, Sunny emerged from the billowing smoke, streams of incandescent lava flowing down from the jade surface of his black armor. He shook it off his shoulder, then glanced at Kai.

"It's done."

Sunny exhaled slowly.

"It seems like the Tyrant had been growing in the depths of the volcano for a long time. In the past, only its minions would have ventured to the surface, but with the growing population of Ravenheart, the scent of human souls must have attracted its attention. It's a good thing that we dealt with the bastard before it shattered the roof of the magma chamber trying to climb up."

A Corrupted Tyrant was a powerful enemy for Kai, and it could still pose some danger to Sunny — but only if Sunny did not pay attention. Since Cassie had informed him of what powers the abominable creature wielded, he managed to kill it both swiftly and cleanly.

In fact, he had spent most of the time simply looking around the depths of the volcano, not battling the abomination.

There were plenty of interesting things to explore there.

Sunny considered his words for a moment.

"Initially, I was a little surprised that you did not follow me down, Nightingale. But once I dove into the lava, I understood… even with my Supreme constitution, staying alive down there was not easy. I was almost cooked alive. This is not a mundane volcano, is it?"

Kai slowly shook his head.

"No, it is not. My own constitution as a Dragonslayer grants me a great deal of resistance against various types of attacks, especially those based on fire… but even for me, the heat inside this volcano is too much."

He sighed.

"You must have seen the reports Lonesome Howl and her scouts brought. The lands west of Ravenheart are a frozen hell — the cold there is so absolute that even Saints cannot survive. But in fact, those lands had not always been frozen, and the theoretical ocean beyond them was not frozen either. The signs of fallen civilizations she discovered, encased in ice, are proof. More than that…"

Kai's expression turned somber.

"The cold must have spread eastward slowly, considering the remains. And it is my belief that it would have continued to spread, eventually turning the entire Dream Realm into a frigid, frozen, dead world — if not for this mountain chain and its mystical volcanoes, which serve as a barrier against the slaying cold. It is because of them and the ash they expel that people can live in Ravenheart, the soil here is so fertile, and the eerie beings that dwell in the snow can't cross over from the frozen wastelands."

He lingered for a moment and added with a faint smile:

"It is also my belief that these volcanoes had been created, or at least enhanced, by the Jade Palace and its Component. Well… in a way."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think Nephis ever mentioned what the Component of Ravenheart is, at least not in detail."

Kai considered his words for a moment.

"It is a bit convoluted, isn't it? The Citadels and their Components. After all, they were created by the Nightmare Spell — but, at the same time, the Spell did not simply invent the powers of the Citadels from scratch. Rather, in most cases, it simply took the innate qualities of existing places of power and rebuilt them in a way that its carriers

could easily use, adding a universal foundation to all of them at the same time. Most Citadels seem to be meant to be ruled by Saints, but the Great Citadels are clearly meant for the Sovereigns."

Sunny nodded.

Indeed… Night Garden, for example, allowed Nephis to anchor both the entrance and the exit points of her Dream Gate in the same world. Since only Supremes could make use of that Component, it was not made to be wielded by a Saint.

Kai continued in a neutral tone:

"So it is not really correct to say that the volcanoes protecting Ravenheart and the lands around it from the cold were created by one of its Component. Rather, they were created by the power of the Jade Palace, and the Spell created a Component based on that power later on."

His beautiful green eyes glistened.

"That Component is… well, honestly, I can only call it terraforming. The Jade Palace can slowly transform the lands around it — for example, it can make them warmer, while at the same time enriching the soil with mystical volcanic ash. As a result, countless people can find shelter from the cold in the realm surrounding Ravenheart, and gather many bountiful harvests a year. If managed correctly, this land can become the treasure trove of humanity."

He shook his head.

"Of course, the opposite is also true. If the ruler of the Jade Palace wished to, they could turn this land into an uninhabitable hell, poisoning the entire Tear River Basin. Oh… and I can't accomplish much with my Transcendent power — the changes would be too slow and gradual. However, Nephis can."

Sunny scratched his helmet.

"Right… I think I remember Cassie and Jet assigning a bunch of renowned scientists to a lengthy research project."

Kai nodded.

"Indeed. Ravenheart — the Jade Palace — offers great power to its ruler. But it is a very intricate affair. After all, building a healthy ecosystem is a difficult task… it is easier to mess things up than to improve upon the existing equilibrium. So, we have left things as they are for now."

Sunny remembered the majestic black silhouette of the Jade Palace. The power Kai described was mystical in nature, but by calling it "terraforming", he made Sunny think about it in a different context.

'I wonder if we can somehow catapult the entire thing to Moon. Or to Mars. That'd be pretty awesome, wouldn't it?'

He chuckled at his own thoughts and nodded at Kai.

"Well, you aren't wrong. Local volcanoes do seem special… but this one in particular is extra special."

Chapter-2302: Beautiful Monster

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, for one, there are structures carved into the main vent and into the walls of the magma chamber. I guess the entire thing was inhabited once, in the past."

The structures were too damaged and deformed by the passage of time and the extreme environment, so Sunny did not glimpse a lot about who had built them and why. However, the ruins looked almost like the remains of an ancient city, or at least an inhabited complex. The few edifices that were somewhat intact reminded him of the Jade Palace and the great stone bridge in front of it.

Interestingly enough, the city seemed to have possessed a form of defensive fortifications. Those fortifications had not been built to protect it from the enemies coming down the vents of the volcano, though… instead, they were facing the depths of the magma chamber, as if guarding the ruins from something that could come from the molten depths of the earth.

Sunny had cooled off enough to dismiss his helmet. Summoning the Endless Spring, he poured cold water onto his sweaty face and smiled.

"Oh, and there are ancient bones littering every fissure and crevice there. Considering that they had not been turned to ash by the lava, the creatures they had belonged to must have been quite powerful. And there were quite... quite a lot of them."

Kai frowned.

"Could it be that the Corrupted Tyrant…"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. That thing seemed too weak to have killed them, let alone spawned them. I'd say that all these creatures did not even die in the volcano. I think someone just tossed them down, like getting rid of the trash."

Kai grew a little wary after hearing those words.

"Who could have done something like that?"

Sunny laughed quietly, then grimaced and coughed when smoke got into his lungs.

"Ah, damn it… who do you think? Must have been the Jade Queen. By the way, can we get out of here?"

Their job done, they headed away from the edge of the abyssal chasm. As they did, Kai asked tentatively:

"Jade Queen?"

Sunny glanced at him and clicked his tongue.

"You know nothing, do you? Did you not research your Citadel at all? Huh! I guess our resident Mr. Perfect is not that perfect, after all."

Kai just smiled.

"I never claimed to be perfect. And admittedly… academics has always been my weak side."

The thought of Kai being bad at something that Sunny was good at felt strangely satisfying.

'I knew it. That guy just coasted through life on nothing but good looks before meeting me!'

Sunny had been such a positive influence on that fool. Who could

have wished for a better friend?

He scoffed.

"Well… to be fair, I don't know that much about the Jade Queen either. She was the original owner of the Jade Palace — in fact, it was built for her."

He thought back to what little he knew about the history of Ravenheart — most of it glimpsed from the random Memories he had received here and there…

Including the most memorable one, the Sin of Solace, which he had received for finishing off the Remnant of the Jade Queen after it was grievously wounded by Saint Tyris.

That damned sword played quite a large role in his life, changing its entire course.

Sunny shivered.

"You must know that the Tomb of Ariel was built by Ariel, the Demon of Dread. Apparently, he also built the Jade Palace for a beautiful monster whom he made into a queen. He also bestowed the sinister gift of forbidden knowledge upon her… whatever that means. Ariel was called the Demon of Dread, he was also the Demon of Truth — so, he must have imparted her with some hideous truths."

He paused for a few moments, then added in a lighter tone:

"Well, anyway. The Jade Queen seemed to have quite the influence in the ancient past, presiding over the Jade Court. She was known across many realms for her beauty and wisdom — so much so that many pilgrims sought to gain an audience with her, braving the snow and ash. Not everyone survived the journey… and not everyone survived the Jade Queen's hospitality, either. Apparently, she had a habit of turning those who looked at her funny into Nightmare Creatures. Well, some kind of creatures, at least."

Kai listened to him intently, absorbed by the tale. Eventually, he asked:

"So… that Jade Queen really lived in Ravenheart once?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Sure. You might even be sleeping in her former bedchamber… but that is pretty much all the information about the Jade Queen I have. I don't even know what she looked like. She might have been a bug, for all I know."

The Remnant of the Jade Queen had been, at least. A huge, strangely beautiful beetle. But that did not really prove anything.

Kai slowly shook his head.

"The throne of the Jade Palace is built for a human, though."

Sunny shrugged.

"Maybe she was a strange monster who had a Transformation Ability that allowed her to become human. Who knows what Ariel did to her? That guy built the Great River, so we know how bizarre his creations were."

He hesitated for a while, and then added:

"He must have cared about the Jade Queen greatly, though. Enough so for Nether to mark the Jade Palace on the wall of the Ebony Tower."

Kai remained silent for a while, then asked with a hint of wistfulness in his voice:

"So what do you think happened to the Jade Queen? Where did she go?"

Sunny gave him a long look.

'What a strange question.'

"How should I know? Maybe the truth she carried destroyed her. Maybe someone grew covetous of her grace and her beauty, and ruined her. Maybe she followed Ariel into the Doom War and

perished on one of its battlefields."

He paused for a moment, then sighed.

"I encountered a Corrupted Tyrant called the Remnant of the Jade Queen once. If that was what remained of her… then her end must not have been happy or beautiful."

Rather, it would have been monstrous.

By then, they had climbed high enough for Kai to take flight comfortably. Sunny once again hid in his shadow.

As Kai streaked across the sky above Ravenheart, a few people stopped and looked up, pointing at his small silhouette with smiles on their faces. Of course, he was not in his dragon form at the moment, so there was no crowd of awed spectators.

Soon enough, Kai landed on the surface of the great stone bridge and walked toward the Jade Palace. The magnificent obsidian edifice towered above him, casting a deep shadow… Sunny felt a hint of awe at that moment, as well.

He had spent several years trying to sneak into the Jade Palace unnoticed, to no avail. The Raven Queen had been too powerful and mysterious, and her daughters were too observant.

But now, Ki Song was gone, her daughters were scattered across the Dream Realm, and Sunny was a Sovereign himself. The gates of the Jade Palace stood open for him, and he could enter freely.

He was full of anticipation.

'I wonder what I'll discover inside.'

Chapter-2303: Jade Palace

The Jade Palace was vast. It was not quite the size of Bastion, which was a stone city in and of itself, but still complicated enough to be like an enormous labyrinth. Interestingly enough, while its exterior had at some point turned entirely black, its inner walls were still pristine and white, as if cut from flawless jade.

There were countless halls, corridors, chambers, stairwells, and passages, all interconnected into a sprawling maze. Even more confusing was the fact that some sections of the palace seemed to have been built with humans in mind, while some were far more daunting in scale, clearly meant for creatures of towering size.

Despite the fact that the beautiful palace had stood empty for thousands of years, it was still emanating a subtle feeling of elegant opulence and majesty.

There were stone gardens within the black walls of Ravenheart, countless statues and intricate reliefs, great pools of icy water, and even bubbling hot springs. More than that, the Jade Palace stretched far underground — and lower still, its foundation opened into a vast system of ice caves that hid inside the lonesome mountain.

Those caves had been where the Queen of Worms had kept her great army of dead puppets.

Less than a hundred Awakened had made the Jade Palace their home during her mother's rule. Later, it became known as Ravenheart, serving as the Citadel of the Great Clan Song — tens of thousands of Awakened warriors were anchored to its Gateway then, with many Masters and Saints living under its roof.

By now, there were hundreds of thousands of Awakened anchored at the Jade Palace, and although the retainers of Clan Song had scattered to serve Seishan and her sisters in various Citadels across

the western reaches of the Dream Realm, Kai's subordinates took their place.

Most of them were Nightsingers, who had been following Kai since the Southern Campaign. The rest of his staff was composed of local Awakened, government agents, emissaries of the Immortal Flame clan — some of whom had been retainers of the Valor clan before — and assistants sent over by the daughters of Ki Song.

There were a few members of the Shadow Clan hidden among them, as well.

The palace had been roughly divided into three areas. The smallest one surrounded the Gateway and was open to the public. A larger area was meant for Kai and his people — it was carefully maintained and tended to, giving the feeling of a beautiful and inhabited space. Finally, the largest area by far was uninhabited.

Awakened soldiers patrolled it regularly, but other than that, there was usually not a soul in sight. Most of the magnificent palace stood empty, shrouded in silence.

Sunny did not know what he was looking for, but he figured out that his shadow sense would discover any anomaly swiftly.

Sadly, there were a few obstacles standing in his way.

"Damnation. I knew it…"

On the first evening, after Kai was done with his duties as the Steward of the West, the two of them had a meal together. However, Sunny was in a dour mood.

Kai gave him a curious look.

"Is the food not to your taste, Sunny?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, the food is good. It's just that this place is giving me trouble."

He remained silent for a few moments, then sighed and leaned back.

"First of all, my spatial Ability barely works within these walls. Secondly, my senses are being blocked by something — it is like I have to fight against all this jade to perceive what is hidden behind it."

Kai smiled.

"Ah. I experienced it as well. I can't see through the walls of the Jade Palace at all."

Sunny picked up a piece of tender meat and bit it fiercely, then waved what remained in the air.

"I am not surprised, though. You know… one time, I got pretty hungry, so I snuck inside a Great Monster to carve out some meat. I did procure the meat, but getting out proved to be a problem — some of my powers were being suppressed, just like here. Because I was inside of a living being. Well, a corpse of a living being."

Kai sighed and raised his wine glass with a trembling hand.

"...So it was the corpse of a Great Monster. Thank the gods."

Sunny ignored his remark and swallowed the rest of the meat.

"We know that Ariel liked to use unconventional building methods and materials. Who knows how he created the Jade Palace? Its walls have no seams at all. Almost as if this entire structure had been cast instead of being constructed… or grown. In any case, exploring it will take more time than I hoped."

Kai smiled.

"Well, there is a lot to explore. A lot of beautiful things to see, as well as things that inspire awe. I haven't had time to see most of the Jade Palace myself, yet, but sometimes I stop to look around and think… great beings once walked these halls. Gods and demons once rested in this garden, just like I am resting here now. Isn't it amazing?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well, yeah. But I am sort of used to stuff like that. One of my

incarnations lives in the Tower of Hope, after all. I brushed sides with a god once — oh, I also swallowed a piece of a daemon. As for beautiful things, you should really come explore the Shadow Realm with me sometime. The view is to die for… literally…"

He laughed.

Kai did, too. Granted, his laugh sounded a little stifled.

"Yeah… maybe I should…"

He paused for a few moments, then asked cautiously:

"So, how long do you think it will take you to find what you are looking for?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I'll start exploring earnestly starting tomorrow. After that, it is all up to luck. Why?"

Kai shook his head.

"Nothing, really. It's just that I'm expecting guests in a few days. The Song sisters are going to be in Ravenheart for business — a couple of them, at least. They don't know that the Lord of Shadows is alive, but I don't think that avoiding their gaze will trouble you."

Sunny coughed.

"Sure. But, just in case… is Seishan coming?"

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"I think so. Why are you asking?"

Sunny grimaced.

"That one… has sharp senses. I'll be careful."

He remained silent for a bit, then shrugged.

"Come to think of it, maybe I won't. After all, those Song sisters had

lived in the Jade Palace the longest. So if we want to find what we're looking for swiftly, wouldn't we want to get their assistance?"

Kai sighed.

"That is true. However, I am not sure they will be willing to help you."

Sunny grinned.

"Don't worry about it. I can be very persuasive when I need to."

He pointed to himself proudly.

"Do you want to know how persuasive I am, Nightingale? Not to brag, but one time, I convinced a dead man to help me by promising to kill him…"

Chapter-2304: Needle in a Haystack

Sunny spent the next few days exploring the Jade Palace as a shadow. Not knowing what to look for, he started from the places that held the most significance, like the throne room...

As it turned out, there were two throne rooms in the Jade Palace. Both were majestic, with thrones that would suit a human, but while one was obviously meant for people, the other was too immense and cavernous, vast enough to fit much larger creatures.

There was a third throne room, too, hidden in the ice caves below the palace — but that one had been created by Ki Song, so Sunny paid it less attention.

Apart from the ice hall where the Raven Queen's throne stood, a few more caves had been polished and cultivated by the builders of Clan Song. As he found out, that was because Revel had lived in the caves below the Jade Palace once, most likely due to the fact that she was unable to step into sunlight because of her Flaw.

In fact, the antisocial princess was still occupying those caves. So, he kept his distance.

Sunny did not find anything particularly relevant to his search in either of the throne rooms, which prompted him to seek out other important areas of the Jade Palace. It was hard to say which space had served which purpose, but he eventually discovered a place that should have been the Jade Queen's bedchamber — it was the largest and most opulent one, at least, as well as one with the best view.

Funnily enough, the current ruler of the Jade Palace, Kai, did not use these quarters as his own. Instead, the beautiful chamber served as a place for strategic meetings with his staff. Sunny accidentally listened

to a few of those, finding it funny how different they felt from both the meetings on the Ivory Island and in the dark halls of the Marvallous Mimic.

The former tended to be solemn and dignified, while the latter tended to be irreverent and borderline nonsensical. Kai's style of leadership, however, was personable and pleasant, just like he himself was.

Every ruler was different.

In any case, Sunny did not discover anything of note in the Queen's supposed bedchamber, either.

Next, he secretly explored the Gateway itself, which was located in a great hall close to the main gate. The tranquil murmur of water filled the hall, with clear streams of it flowing down the white walls into elaborate channels cut into the jade floor. The Gateway itself was a beautiful sculpture, its vague silhouette obscured by the falling water.

Exploring the Gateway Hall was a little difficult because it was always full of people. Of course, Sunny managed to remain unseen, in the end… to no result whatsoever.

After that, he even spent a day diving into various pools across the Jade Palace — some of them were both vast and immensely deep, so it took some time. Sunny did not find any traces of Weaver's lineage, but he did find out that some of those pools had actually been guest rooms of sort, meant for aquatic creatures.

"Ah… this is a little frustrating."

Although neither of them had made arrangements, it just happened that Kai and Sunny ended up having dinners together in the evenings.

Sunny looked at the charming Saint and sighed.

"Maybe the thing I am looking for was never in the Jade Queen's possession? The hint only said that it was lost to Dread. Come to think of it, Ariel must have spent plenty of time in the Jade Palace. Where are his chambers? Did he have a place to stay here?"

Kai looked up from his food and raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think so. Then again, we don't really know what daemons looked like, so it is hard to guess."

Sunny pushed his empty plate away and sighed.

"Who says we don't know what they looked like?"

He raised a hand and started to extend his fingers.

"I met the Demon of Desire personally. What a stunner! I saw the Demon of Destiny as well, albeit from afar. Would not recommend. While I never met the Demon of Fate, I did see their arm once... that was quite memorable. Did you know that Weaver had seven fingers? On each hand, I mean, not overall. Oh, and I've been to the grave of the Demon of Oblivion. Her sarcophagus is pretty human-sized."

He scratched the back of his head.

"Don't ask me what they look like, though. It's… pretty hard to describe."

Kai seemed very focused on his cup of tea, for some reason.

He took a deep breath, then said weakly:

"N—no… I wasn't going to ask…"

Sunny looked at him with compassion.

'Poor guy. He must be really tired from work.'

Leaning back, he closed his eyes for a few moments.

"Actually, I'm curious. You did not even ask what it is that I am looking for, or why I must stay hidden. Don't you have any questions at all?"

Kai looked at him for a while, then smiled faintly and turned back to his cup.

"I've learned not to ask unnecessary questions a long time ago. For someone like me, it's too easy to receive an answer that I would have

preferred not to know."

Sunny opened one eye and studied him silently.

Then, he scoffed.

"Oh, because of your Flaw."

He shook his head.

"I can't say that I understand why someone would choose to remain willingly ignorant, but actually, you might have a point. You are a Saint now, so learning something that should have remained hidden can be dangerous. Some knowledge won't just hurt your feelings — it may very well destroy you. And it will only grow more dangerous the further on the Path of Ascension you go."

Kai put down his cup and nodded.

"I know. Some truths are not meant to be known by mortal men… and unlike the Demon of Dread, I can't bury the things I learn in a tomb."

Sunny grinned.

"There's Cassie, though. She can bury them for you."

His grin widened a little.

"...In fact, who's to say that she hasn't already liberated you from a memory or two? You'd never know."

Kai looked at him in confusion, then frowned.

"Cassie would never do something like that without my consent."

And, at the same time, a familiar voice resounded in his head:

[Hey!]

This time, there was a hint of indignation in it.

Sunny laughed.

"The two of you share something in common."

He shook his head with a smile.

"Both of you are far too nice to really make use of your terrible powers. I guess it's a relief, though."

Sunny leaned forward and asked:

"In any case, when is Seishan arriving? Unlike you, all I want is answers. So, I want to ask her a couple of questions."

Kai hesitated for a few moments.

"Tomorrow. But… she and her sisters are the backbone of the entire region under my authority."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"And?"

Kai seemed to be considering his words carefully.

"So, Sunny… can you… tone it down when we speak with them? A little."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, scandalized.

What kind of question was that?!

"Of course, I can."

Kai nodded with relief, then suddenly tensed.

"Wait… you said that you can tone it down. Not that you will."

Sunny gave him a satisfied smile.

"Look at you, Nightingale. You know your friend so well…"

Chapter-2305: Childhood Home

Seishan did, indeed, arrive the next day, accompanied by two of her sisters. Kai met them at the end of the great stone bridge and invited them into the Jade Palace, where they were supposed to have a discussion regarding the development of the Dream Realm's western reaches.

Each of the seven Song sisters controlled a Citadel in the basin of the River of Tears or in Godgrave, although some of them spent most of their time here in Ravenheart. Beastmaster was in charge of a lion's share of logistics of the Human Domain, for example, Lonesome Howl commanded Awakened soldiers in a subjugation crusade across the wild expanse of the Dream Realm, Silent Stalker led teams of seasoned scouts to explore previously unmapped regions…

Seishan herself was somewhat of an administrator, assisting Kai in the infinitely complex task of managing the West.

Today, it was two of the sisters that Kai invited into the Jade Palace, while the third emerged from the caves below it. The meeting took place in a room without windows, illuminated only by the light of a Memory lantern — there were plenty of shadows for Sunny to hide in, but he still chose the darkest corner, wary of the three women bearing the lineage of Beast God.

Revel was leaning on the wall with her arms crossed, her expression aloof, while Seishan and Death Singer took seats opposite Kai. The mood in the room was somewhat strange — after all, Kai was an usurper ruling their childhood home, and they, who should have owned the Jade Palace, had to be invited in by him.

That said, the atmosphere was surprisingly cordial. The Song sisters were not exactly friendly, but they were also not hostile… whatever emotions they felt about their mother's fate were kept private, and all they showed the world was cold practicality.

"Greetings."

Kai smiled, ready to begin the discussion.

Sunny remained hidden. In fact, he was not planning to reveal himself unless there was no other choice — Kai was supposed to serve as his proxy, asking the questions that Sunny wanted to ask.

Luckily, it was quite difficult to discover Sunny if he did not want to be discovered. Not only was he a shadow, but his presence had also assumed a special quality after he attained Supremacy — it was easily suppressed, disappearing completely if he wished to.

'I don't even have blood now… not in my natural state, at least. Surely, I won't be discovered.'

As soon as he thought that, Death Singer looked around with a confused expression and said, her voice sounding strangely excited:

"This room… smells like death."

'What!'

Revel and Seishan spared her glances, while Kai coughed.

"Concerning the newest herd of Nightmare Creatures captured by Lonesome Howl in the south — it is being driven north as we speak and is expected to arrive at the base of the Moonriver Plains in two weeks. I hope that Beastmaster will be ready to enthrall the selected abominations swiftly. The selection this time is skewed in favor of construction work… procuring flight-capable creatures has proven difficult once again…"

Revel looked at him darkly.

"Something is wrong here."

Kai paused, then asked politely:

"What makes you say that, Saint Revel?"

Seishan was studying the room, her expression calm. When her gaze

stopped at Kai, she answered instead of her sister:

"Hel says that this room smells like death. And you are a surprisingly terrible liar, Kai — you always have been, ever since the Bright Castle."

His smile grew a little forced.

Revel raised an eyebrow, her dark eyes full of amusement:

"Your blood has a strange scent today, Nightingale. You seem… stressed."

Kai forced out a chuckle.

"…Do I?"

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny let out a mental sigh.

'Total failure.'

These divine lineages were tough to deal with!

With that, he manifested himself into the human form, took a few steps forward, and calmly sat down next to Kai.

Revel suddenly tensed, while Death Singer stared at him with wide eyes. Only Seishan remained composed, studying him calmly.

Sunny smiled at her.

"Please stop bullying my best friend. He gets shy around… well, anyone. And also, smelling someone's blood? That's creepy. Keep your beastly habits private, please."

Death Singer looked at Seishan and pointed at Sunny with a finger.

"Sister… I see dead people!"

Seishan smiled silently, while Revel smirked.

"So you never actually died. Why am I not surprised?"

Sunny looked at the Lightslayer and grinned.

"Oh, actually, I did die. But staying dead for too long seemed terribly uncouth. So, I snapped out of it."

Kai turned his head to stare at him in resigned silence.

Seishan, meanwhile, bowed slightly.

"We greet the King."

Sunny waved a hand dismissively.

"No, no. The King? That is too formal…"

He smiled brightly.

"Just call me the Dark Lord."

Seishan opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

Finally, she spoke in a carefully neutral tone:

"As you wish, my lord. Judging by your company… shall I take it that Nephis is aware of your return?"

Sunny nodded.

"If you are asking if there's another Domain War coming up, then no. We have no plans of wrestling for the throne of humanity, she and I. In fact, it's quite the opposite."

Seishan let out a relieved sigh.

"I see."

There was almost a hint of bitterness in her voice.

She lingered for a moment, then asked tentatively:

"If so… to what do we owe the pleasure of meeting you, my lord?"

And at the same time, Death Singer pointed at Sunny again.

"Sister, who is this dead boy?"

She glanced at him furtively, then added:

"...And why is he so pretty?"

Seishan exhaled slowly.

"Hel… you promised to tone it down…"

For some reason, Kai looked at her with compassion.

Sunny, meanwhile, stared at the delicate woman with resentment.

"Boy? Listen, auntie... ah, never mind. Why do I even care?"

He was irritated... a little.

'Our oracle is way better. And younger!'

Seishan looked at him, then at Kai, then back to him.

Eventually, she said:

"Hel, you've met him before. This is the Lord of Shadows."

Chapter-2306: Forbidden Fruit

As much as the Song sisters were shocked to see Sunny, they quickly regained their composure. In truth, they must have suspected that there was something strange about his supposed death — others might not have seen it as strange, but several of Ki Song's daughters had faced him on the battlefield.

They knew that he would not have gone down easily, especially not after attaining Supremacy.

"...Needless to say, you should keep the fact that I am not as dead as everyone thinks a secret."

He smiled at them pleasantly.

They looked at each other. Eventually, Revel shrugged.

"That should not be a problem."

Sunny looked at Death Singer dubiously, prompting her to grin.

"No one listens to what I have to say, anyway."

She leaned forward a little.

"Except for you, Lord of Shadows! You are the only one who understands. Say, since you're a Sovereign now… do you need a concubine? I can cook, I can clean! I can prophesize death, destruction, and doom! Oh, and I am very good at…"

She suddenly swayed and gave Seishan a reproachful look. Sunny, of course, sensed the older Song sister gave the delicate oracle a kick under the table.

He barely managed to maintain his composure, his smile turning a little forced.

"No… no, I don't need a concubine."

Kai nodded seriously.

"He's telling the truth."

Then, he leaned toward Sunny and added in a whisper:

"She's lying, though. She can't cook or clean."

Sunny stared at him flatly.

"I didn't need to know that."

Kai blinked.

"Oh. Right. Sorry…"

Seishan let out a long sigh.

"So, what exactly do you want from us?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments. He did not want to reveal too much, and at the same time, there was not much he could reveal — after all, he did not know what Weaver had hidden here, in the Jade Palace.

Eventually, he said simply:

"I am searching for something in Ravenheart. Something that must have been hidden here a long, long time ago. Your mother knew this Citadel best, but I can't ask her. So, I am asking you… how well do you know the Jade Palace?"

Seishan raised an eyebrow.

"How well do we know it? Quite well, I'd say. We lived here for quite some time as children. Obviously, most of us were anchored here as Awakened, as well — my other sisters spent much more time in Ravenheart than me, of course, since I spent a decade on the Forgotten Shore."

Revel nodded.

"Seishan was what… twelve, thirteen when our mother became a Saint? The rest of us were either the same age or younger. We would spend a few months in Ravenheart every year after that, until the Spell called upon us. Those who survived the First Nightmare would then come to anchor themselves in Ravenheart. So, we've been around this palace for most of our lives."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"Were there places Ki Song paid special attention to?"

Revel tilted her head a little.

"Naturally, the Jade Palace hides many secrets. There are all kinds of hidden passages, secret enchantments, and strange places here. It is difficult to answer without knowing what exactly you are looking for."

Sunny frowned.

A few moments later, he asked tentatively:

"Were there maybe areas that you were strictly prohibited from approaching?"

Seishan chuckled.

"Well… Howl and Stalker were forbidden from going near the deeper pools. I doubt that is what you are asking about, though."

Revel looked into the distance, thinking.

"The caves were mostly meant for puppets. We were not exactly forbidden from being there, though — there was just no point. Other than that, nothing comes to mind… of course, it would have been strange if we loitered around the living quarters of the clan's retainers."

Sunny sighed.

"So, nothing really comes to mind?"

Both Seishan and Revel shook their heads.

Death Singer, meanwhile, gave them a strange look.

"Goodness me. My sisters are really old now. They don't remember anything!"

They looked at her in confusion, causing the delicate beauty to sigh in exasperation.

"There was actually one room that we were completely, absolutely forbidden from entering. How could you forget?"

Seishan and Revel frowned.

Then, their expressions changed, as if they remembered something that had long been forgotten.

Seishan smiled.

"Oh. Right…"

Revel, meanwhile, scoffed.

"That was a long time ago, but you are correct."

Sunny looked at each of them, then leaned forward a little.

"Well, are you going to tell me what that room was or not? An armory? A runic chamber? Maybe some kind of hidden space where Divine soul shards that power this entire place are secretly kept?"

Death Singer shook her head energetically.

"No! It's the Toy Room."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Then, he blinked a few times more.

Finally, he leaned back and asked in a bewildered tone:

"The… Toy Room?"

Seishan nodded.

"Yes. The Toy Room… and before you ask, my lord, it is just that. It is a storage room where various toys are kept — dolls, toy knights, playing sets, strange oddities, and the like. Most of it has long turned to dust, of course, because these toys are as ancient as the Jade Palace. But some of them were preserved surprisingly well, and there are too many to count."

Revel smiled wistfully.

"Naturally, it was like a treasury for us when we were children. But… some of those toys were really dangerous. Some were even enchanted with mysterious magic. So, after a couple of incidents, our mother prohibited us from exploring the toy room."

Death Singer looked at Sunny pitifully.

"Yes. That was after someone… and I won't point a finger at them, even if they are in this room… managed to vanish from the face of the Dream Realm for an entire week. Mother almost took the whole Citadel apart searching for them."

Seishan smiled.

"So, yes. There was a place we were forbidden to enter, and that place was the Toy Room."

'A toy room.'

That… was not exactly what Sunny had expected to hear.

A clue was a clue, though.

He smiled.

"So… can you show me the way to that Toy Room?"

Chapter-2307: Toy Room

The Toy Room seemed to be located in a remote corner of the Jade Palace, down on one of its lowest and most desolate floors. Revel took the lead, calmly guiding them across the scenic labyrinth of magnificent corridors, halls, and galleries.

Sunny had explored some of these places already, but he had no idea that one could travel between them that swiftly, or that many of them were actually connected. More than that, Revel seemed to follow a path that avoided windows, often using secret passages and activating hidden enchantments that revealed previously unseen doorways.

They had not met a single soul on the way.

At one point, Sunny glanced at Kai.

'Huh...'

It must have been quite unnerving, to know that a murderous demoness not only basically lived in his basement, but could also get anywhere in the Jade Palace without being seen. She could probably even appear in Kai's living quarters unnoticed, to do something terrible.

Like kill him in his sleep.

Poor guy must have been sleeping with one eye open for an entire year!

Sunny looked at his friend with pity.

"Hey, Kai... she really knows her way around here."

Kai seemed unperturbed, but hearing Sunny speak, he coughed

awkwardly.

"Ah... yes. Certainly. Lady Revel has lived in this palace for a long time, after all..."

Leading them to a narrow stairwell, Revel ignored their voices and yawned.

"Sorry. I usually only go out at night… I would have been asleep by now, considering that the sun is high up."

Seishan chuckled.

"Come now. I don't need Kai to tell that you are lying — you don't usually go out even at night, do you, Revel?"

Revel glanced at her sister with an aloof expression.

"Well... true."

As Sunny had learned after the war, Dark Dancer… was a reclusive homebody, surprisingly enough. She preferred to hide herself in her caves unless there was a mission she had to accomplish.

Technically, Revel was supposed to be managing a Citadel on the Storm Coast, but since days there were long and sunny, she passed it on to one of the newly risen Saints and returned to Ravenheart. Now, she was more or less the cavalry — whenever warriors in the western reaches of the Dream Realm encountered trouble, she was dispatched to solve it with violence.

Of course, she only descended upon the battlefield at night.

Sunny was itching to try recruiting her into the Shadow Clan, considering the eternal darkness that reigned on the Forgotten Shore. But since there was nothing for a Saint to do there, really, he reluctantly postponed that idea.

Humanity did not have enough Saints yet to send someone of Revel's caliber his way, anyway — at least for now.

"Is there something on my back?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, realizing that he had been staring at Revel as she guided them down the stairs.

He smiled.

"Not really."

He paused for a moment, then added with a chuckle:

"Did you ever imagine that you would be comfortable turning your back to me, though? I find it amusing."

It was undeniably strange, to be taking a walk through the halls of Ravenheart with the daughters of Ki Song.

Revel seemed to smile darkly.

"Who says that I am comfortable?"

Sunny laughed quietly.

"...Fair."

Just like that, they reached the remote corridor. Most of the Jade Palace was illuminated by sorcerous lights, but the ones here seemed damaged by the passage of time, their radiance dim and uneven.

Sunny looked at the heavy iron door. In the weak blinking light of the sorcerous lanterns, its beautifully decorated surface looked dark and uninviting.

He looked at Seishan and her sisters.

"You really used to sneak here as children?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Why?"

Sunny shook his head in utter bafflement.

"I mean… look around. This place is beyond creepy! I am a Supreme, and even I am creeped out."

Kai nodded.

"He's telling the truth."

Sunny gave him a scathing glare.

"Right. Of course, I am."

Seishan looked at him strangely.

"They're just toys, though. Some of them are a little magical, but that's that — what's the worst that can happen?"

Sunny and Kai winced at the same time, as if they had swallowed bitter lemons.

"Why did you have to say that aloud?!"

"Lady Seishan, please, do not say things like that!"

The ensuing silence was broken by Death Singer's giggle.

She looked at them brightly.

"Death… oh, death! I feel it! We're all going to die!"

Sunny flinched.

"Not now, damn it! Please!"

Death Singer fell silent and looked at him with a pout.

Shaking her head, Revel opened the heavy door and summoned a Memory lantern.

"Come inside."

She entered first, followed by her sisters. Sunny and Kai glanced at each other and then joined them.

The Toy Room…

Was, indeed, just that.

Actually, it was a series of rooms, all filled with shelves, display cabinets, and trunks of various sizes. The atmosphere inside the Toy Room must have been festive and lavish once, but now, it seemed forlorn and eerie.

Most of the toys had deteriorated or crumbled into dust, laying on the floor in bleak piles, but some had survived the cruel flow of time. Sunny looked around warily, taking in the sight of beautifully dressed dolls, silver knights with articulated joints, plushy magical creatures with beady eyes made from gems, and various playtime implements.

The Song sisters were looking around, as well. Seishan was looking at a doll in a pretty dress, Revel was looking at a wind-up swordsman, while Death Singer was mesmerized by a colorful, cute, and chubby stuffed animal.

Their expressions were wistful.

Eventually, Seishan shook her head and sighed.

"I really wanted to have this doll, back then. But our mother had forbidden us from taking anything out of the room. How strange… now I can take whatever I want freely, and yet, I don't want anything."

Sunny's attention, meanwhile, was drawn to a large dollhouse in the shape of a miniature version of the Jade Palace that stood on a stand in the middle of the first room. It was created with a stunning level of intricacy, to the degree that there were even tiny streams of water flowing in the replica of the Gateway Hall.

However, the dollhouse was eerie and frightening instead of beautiful. That was because all the dolls inside of it — and there were dozens of them — were laying on the floor, dead, their tiny clothes covering intricately carved toy skeletons.

What kind of sick toymaker had created this morbid thing?

Sunny raised a hand to touch the wall of the dollhouse.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Sunny froze in place, then gave Revel a wary look.

"Why?"

She chuckled in her low, cold voice.

"That is how I, Seishan, and Beastmaster ended up disappearing for a week. If you accidentally activate the dollhouse… you'll become a doll."

Death Singer giggled.

"More of a doll, she means."

Revel scowled at her.

"Stop it. Regardless, there is nothing dangerous inside, but we were pretty starved by the time our mother found us. I don't know how she reversed the sorcery of the dollhouse, either — which means that no one knows. So, keep your distance."

Sunny looked at the intricate dollhouses, feeling a chill run down his spine.

So all these dolls had not been made to resemble skeletal remains. They had been living beings once, instead.

Suddenly, the Toy Room seemed at least a hundred times more sinister.

Exhaling slowly, he took a few careful steps away from the dollhouse and turned away.

His smile was forced.

"Let's… let's look around. Carefully."

Chapter-2308: Playthings

Sunny really hoped that the piece of Weaver's lineage was not hidden inside the dollhouse. Luckily, he felt nothing but an eerie sense of repulsion when standing in front of the dreadful toy… even though he was neither Fated nor connected to the tapestry of fate anymore, and therefore had lost his supernatural intuition, his senses as a Supreme were still beyond that of a mere mortal.

He would have felt something if a daemon's legacy was nearby. More importantly, Blood Weave would have responded to the presence of another piece of the Demon of Fate.

So, after studying the creepy dollhouse from a safe distance, Sunny shifted his attention elsewhere. He did feel that there was something special about that particular toy… a subtle scent of a daemon, even.

But that scent did not belong to Weaver.

"I think Ariel made this one."

Kai glanced at him, remained silent for a bit, and nodded.

"That very well may be."

Sunny looked around the Toy Room, studying various toys. The Song sisters had wandered off, lost in the memories of their childhoods… despite his unease, this place must have been magical for adolescent girls. Especially those who had been orphans once, like Seishan and her sisters.

Orphans did not live easy lives in this world. Sunny knew it all too well himself… and just like them, he had been robbed of the joy of having toys as a kid.

Granted, unlike them, he had not been adopted by a powerful Legacy

witch.

Come to think of it…

Sunny narrowed his eyes and glanced at Seishan.

'The Song sisters were adopted. Rain was adopted. What the hell, how come I'm the only one who hasn't been adopted?!'

Where was justice in that?

Kai smiled faintly.

"You have a peculiar expression, Sunny. What are you thinking about?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Just thinking about how my life would have changed if someone like Ki Song had taken me off the streets. For better or worse."

He sighed.

"She really cared about her daughters a lot. However… she also forced the lineage of Beast God on them, as well as infected them with the Nightmare Spell. Were they lucky or unlucky to have met her? I'm not quite sure."

With that, he looked around once more and added, his voice somber:

"I'm also not sure if the Jade Queen was lucky to have met the Demon of Dread."

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"How do you mean?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, think about it. Why is there a room full of toys in the depths of the Jade Palace?"

Kai seemed stumped by the question. Sunny remained silent for a bit,

then said wistfully:

"It is possible that the Jade Queen had children, or that she simply enjoyed collecting toys. However, it is also possible that she was raised here, in this stone palace. By the Demon of Dread."

He looked at the figurines wearing pretty dresses, dashing knights cast of precious metals, plush beasts with gemlike eyes… and the intricate dollhouse brimming with the bones of perished dolls.

His expression turned somber.

"Daemons were forbidden from siring offspring, you know. But they all seemed to rebel against that prohibition, in their own ways. Weaver left behind a secret Lineage. Nether created the Stone Saints. Hope lived among humans and cared for them as her own. The Demon of Imagination had her mirrors and illusions…"

Sunny sighed.

"But what did Ariel have?"

Kai hesitated for a few moments, then said cautiously:

"He had the Jade Queen?"

Sunny shrugged, unsure.

"Maybe."

With that, he left Kai behind and went to explore the Toy Room.

The five of them wandered the series of chambers for a while, studying the curios hidden there in ancient times. There were a lot of wondrous things to see, but none of them was what Sunny wanted to find.

Eventually, only one last room remained.

And, coincidentally, Sunny felt his blood stir as he approached it.

'...There?'

He glanced at Kai and the Song sisters, hesitated for a few moments, and said:

"Wait."

They looked at him curiously.

Sunny did not know what he would discover in the depths of the Toy Room, but he had a strong suspicion that the fourth piece of Weaver's lineage would not fall into his hands easily. The first three had not, after all.

So… he had to be careful.

Looking at his companions — one intended, the other three accidental, he took a deep breath and spoke:

"There is a high chance that something unexpected will happen once we enter that room. Whatever it is… don't panic and let me handle it. If things seem too dangerous, retreat immediately."

He paused, scratched his head, and then added nonchalantly:

"Oh, and if something happens to me… wait until the next me arrives. Should only take a few days."

There was a small chance that he would lose an incarnation here. That did not mean that he would give up on recovering the piece of Weaver's Legacy.

Revel tilted her head a little.

"The next… you?"

Sunny gave her a wide smile.

"Yeah, the next me. What, did you think that being killed once would actually kill me?"

She stared at him for a few moments, then let out a frustrated sigh.

"If I didn't think that, I wouldn't have tried to kill you, would I?"

Sunny laughed.

"Probably not. But, hey… it was an admirable attempt. No, really — the ambush at Vanishing Lake was like a work of art. I gained so much that day! Thank you."

Revel gritted her teeth, then ground them.

"...You're welcome."

Kai leaned toward him and whispered:

"She's lying. You're not welcome."

Sunny gave him a stare, and then whispered back:

"Why are you whispering, fool? Everyone can hear you!"

Kai coughed in embarrassment.

"Oh… right. Sorry. It's a habit."

Shaking his head, Sunny took a deep breath and summoned Slayer. The murderous Shadow rose from the darkness, looking at him and his companions from behind her veil.

Death Singer immediately pointed a finger and opened her mouth, her face beaming with excitement, but before she could say anything, Seishan covered her mouth with a hand.

"Ah… I see you have a new servant, my lord."

Sunny smiled.

"Oh, she's not a servant. She's an employee. Actually, now that I think about it, the two of you are kindred spirits! She only accepts payment in blood."

Seishan did not say anything, but her beautiful eyes suddenly glistened with a strange emotion.

Sunny chuckled.

"But don't worry, I won't be collecting blood donations today. I already paid her this week, and plus… I don't want to brag, but she only has a taste for my blood."

Turning away, he pushed the last door open and walked inside a small room.

It had shelves with ancient toys, as well, but there was also a low table in the middle of it, surrounded by soft cushions.

There was something on the table…

A square jade board with small hinges in the middle, which suggested that it could be folded to become a case. Its surface was separated into seven rows of seven squares each — most of them were white, with only three squares at the bottom of the board standing out due to their vivid black color.

There were intricately carved figurines standing on various squares, too, most of them representing terrifying monsters. The three black figurines were surrounded by a dozen white ones.

Sunny stared at the board intently, feeling his blood responding to it with a strange, tingling sensation.

There were no Nightmare Creatures inside the room. No terrible danger, no startling secrets.

Just old toys and the beautifully crafted jade board.

Sunny raised an eyebrow, confused.

"What the hell is this?"

Slayer was already in the room, and Kai entered next.

He looked around, then studied the jade board curiously.

Finally, he spoke:

"I think it's… chess."

Chapter-2309: Death Game

Sunny looked at the jade board for a few moments, then turned to Kai.

"Chess? Have you gone blind all of a sudden? This looks nothing like chess."

Indeed. Sunny did not know too much about chess, but Teacher Julius had taught him how to play during his days as a guest lecturer at the Academy. A chessboard was supposed to have eight rows of squares, not seven. More importantly, white and black squares were supposed to be placed in a grid pattern — the jade board in front of him, however, was almost entirely white.

Not to mention that the monstrous figures were nothing like the ones he was familiar with. There were no pawns, knights, bishops, or rooks — instead, there were only a variety of monstrous creatures.

Kai chuckled.

"I meant to say that it looks like a game similar to chess."

Sunny frowned.

It looked more like a war map to him. But why would a war map be in a toy room?

"He's right!"

Death Singer entered the chamber next and looked at the jade board with a fascinated expression. Then, she stopped moving entirely.

Her pupils widened, making her glistening eyes look even larger.

Sunny waved a hand in front of her face.

"Hello? What exactly do you mean?"

The petite woman turned her head and slowly focused on him, then threw a furtive glance at the board and forced out a smile.

"Oh… it's the Death of a Tyrant, also known as Death Game. It is a game similar to chess that was popular in various regions of the Dream Realm once, a long time ago. Some even say... that it was invented by Shadow God himself!"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, then turned to the jade board as Seishan and Revel came in.

"Really?"

Death Singer nodded energetically.

"Really, really! Seishan, tell him!"

Seishan covered her nose with a hand, as if overwhelmed by a powerful scent. Her eyes grew strangely unfocused for a few moments, but then she regained her composure and spoke in a calm tone:

"It does seem that way. Death Game is similar to chess, but instead of sixteen figures, each player controls fourteen — seven Beasts, two Monsters, two Demons, two Devils, and a Tyrant. Just like in chess, each figure moves according to a specific pattern, but the rules are a bit more complicated. That is because when you play the Death of a Tyrant, your Domain plays an important role too."

She pointed to the board, where three black squares were surrounded by a sea of white ones.

"That is because the color of a square affects the battles between figures. Black figures have an advantage while battling on black squares, while white figures have an advantage while battling on white squares — unless they are surrounded mostly by squares of the opposite color. You can also conquer squares to make them a part of your Domain. So, positioning and movement carry greater strategic meaning."

Seishan shrugged.

"Well, there are other differences as well. For example, in some versions of Death Game, there are squares with special properties, like the Castle or the Shrine. The former never changes color, while the latter can give a blessing in return for a sacrifice — if two figures battle on a Shrine square, the one that is killed is considered the sacrifice, while the one that remains receives the blessing."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Interesting. How do you know all this?"

Seishan chuckled.

"How do you not know? It's a popular game among Legacy children. We used to play it, as well, when we were young. Our mother taught us."

Sunny stared at her with an unreadable expression. Then, he shrugged.

"That's because I'm not a Legacy, I guess."

She seemed surprised. Actually, Kai seemed startled, too.

"You're not?"

Sunny scoffed.

"Why, did you all imagine that I was a bastard child of a powerful clan, or had been raised by some sinister shadow faction? Sorry to disappoint you, but no… I am a completely self-made man."

He contemplated for a few moments, then added:

"Actually, I take it back. No one in this world is really self-made, and I too have received plenty of help from generous people along the way."

With that, Sunny focused on the jade board.

Most of the squares were white, and there were far more white figures left standing. The black side only had three figures left — one of them was wearing a crown, and was obviously the Tyrant, while the other two seemed to be mere Beasts.

He tilted his head a little.

"...Seems like someone did not finish a game."

The black side was at a fatal disadvantage, but the Tyrant was still standing, which meant that there was still a possibility of clawing one's way to victory.

Of course, it was more or less a hopeless situation.

He studied the intricately carved figures for a few moments, then shivered, suddenly overcome by an ominous sense of dread.

The jade board… gave him the same feeling as the eerie dollhouse. Perhaps it had been created by Ariel, as well.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then asked:

"Who do you think the players were?"

Nobody answered.

But he could imagine the Demon of Dread and the Jade Queen sitting on the cushions, moving the figures across the jade board and waging a mock war against each other.

Had the Jade Queen played white? Or had she played black?

…In the end, it did not matter. What mattered was the fact that his blood stirred when he looked at the jade board. Which meant that the key to recovering the fourth piece of Weaver's lineage was somehow connected to this Death Game.

Sunny took a step forward and looked at the jade figures. Eventually, his gaze stopped on the tallest of the white figures… the White Tyrant.

'It's not the board itself. It's this one figure, in particular.'

His senses told him that whatever he was looking for was somehow contained in that small jade statuette.

'I wonder if I can find traces of divinity here.'

Sunny needed to understand if the jade board was enchanted, as well. So, he shifted his gaze and peered into its depths.

And when he did…

The shadows populating the small chamber suddenly surged, reeling back from the game table. Sunny himself paled, his eyes widening.

His hand moved slightly, as if grasping for a Memory weapon.

The others noticed the change in his posture. Revel was the first one to frown.

"What's wrong?"

Sunny remained motionless, looking at the jade board with a somber expression.

Then, he said evenly:

"Everyone... get away from that thing…"

Chapter-2310: Fear the Truth

'I'm going crazy.'

How had he not sensed a thing?

Sunny had sharp senses, and they had only grown sharper after he attained Supremacy. All Awakened could feel certain things — presence, power, the subtle flow of soul essence… Corruption. And the stronger they grew, the more sensitive they became to the hidden side of the world.

Especially so when it came to beings who were twisted by the corrupting influence of the Void. Just like abominations could sense the scent of human souls, Awakened responded to the presence of their sworn enemies — Nightmare Creatures.

And yet, Sunny had felt nothing until he gazed into the depths of the beautiful jade board.

Inside the Death Game…

Was a sea of Corruption so vast and dark that it made his blood run cold.

It was contained flawlessly, with not even a drop of it seeping out, but he could see the bottomless well of appalling darkness moving subtly. Surging, straining… waiting.

He had never witnessed anything that malignant and pestilent before — not even when gazing at the corrupted deity, Cursed Tyrant Condemnation.

'How the hell…'

How had he not felt it?

Sunny should have become covered in cold sweat as soon as he entered the Toy Room.

'That damned daemon!'

What the hell had Ariel been thinking, leaving something like that lying around?!

"Everyone... get away from that thing."

The others did not know it yet, but they were standing near a bomb. A terrifying, inexplicable bomb full of Corruption.

No, come to think of it, Death Singer had reacted to the jade board strangely. Seishan had covered her nose, as well, as if overwhelmed by the stench of blood. Sunny had noted their reactions, but having sensed no immediate threat, chose to question them later.

At the moment, he was closest to the jade board. Kai was directly behind him, while Slayer was on the other side of the game table. The Song sisters were closer to the door.

Hearing the tension in his voice, they backed away slowly.

Sunny took a careful step back, as well.

When he did, though, he noticed something…

There were four runes carved into the jade board, one on each side.

'Snow. Ash.'

His eyes narrowed.

'Fear…'

He did not see the fourth rune from where stood, but could sense its shape in the shadow cast by the jade board.

'...Truth?'

And just as Sunny read the fourth rune…

The world suddenly shifted, dissolving into darkness.

"Dam…"

***

"...ation!"

Sunny fell, his knees sinking into the soft ash. A cold wind suddenly blew across his face, making him squint.

The first thing he felt was that he was not in the small underground chamber anymore, surrounded from all sides by white jade. Instead, he was in a vast open space… standing on his knees under a boundless sky.

'What the?'

Sunny jumped to his feet and reached into the shadows, manifesting a black odachi from them. The Jade Mantle revealed itself, covering his body like a black carapace. His shadow sense shot outward, searching for any sign of immediate danger.

However, nothing around him was moving. The world was still, with only the wind blowing across the desolate expanse.

It was only then that Sunny finally saw where he was. His hand trembled.

'What the hell?'

Stunned, he lingered for a moment, and then lowered his sword.

The Jade Palace… had disappeared.

Sunny was somewhere else entirely.

He was standing in the crater of a restless volcano. Behind him, a billowing pillar of smoke was rising into the dark sky, with moonlight spilling through the rifts in the clouds of ash. Black flakes were falling down like snow, covering the ground in a soft carpet.

Sunny could not see it, but he could feel a massive shape hidden in the pillar of smoke. It was an ancient, crumbling fortress, its tall walls half-buried in the ash.

As his shadow sense encompassed the world, he felt the rugged shape of stone slopes that fell at a steep angle, surrounding him from all sides. There was nothing else there, at least nothing he could find at a quick glance.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"...Am I on the other side of the bridge?"

He seemed to be standing in the crater of a towering volcano. The reasonable assumption would be that he somehow returned to where he and Kai had passed days before, but…

Where was the city? Where was the bridge? Where was the Jade Palace?

His shadow sense did not find any structures on the ashen slopes. More than that, the shape of the volcano felt unfamiliar.

"Have I been teleported to somewhere else in the mountain range, then?"

Sunny scowled.

What about Kai, Slayer, and the Song sisters?

What was going on?

An ominous suspicion rose in his mind, but he ignored it for the moment.

The Jade Palace might have disappeared, but his shadow sense was still being somewhat suppressed. Its range was severely limited. Sunny could only feel the top of the volcano, but not its roots or other mountains that must have surrounded it.

That was… troubling.

The first thing he needed to do was figure out where he was.

[Cassie?]

There was no response.

Turning into a shadow, Sunny glided across the ash and soon crested the edge of the crater, thus reaching the highest point of the fuming volcano. He assumed his human form once again and looked around, his expression turning somber.

The landscape in front of him… was strange, to say the least.

The volcano he found himself on was not a part of a mountain range. Instead, it stood apart from everything, towering above a sea of misty clouds. The sky above was obscured by ash, rare rays of moonlight illuminating the stark world…

There were other lonesome peaks rising from the clouds in the distance, situated in a strangely symmetrical grid.

There was another volcano to his right, and one more to his left.

In front of them, far beyond the veil of ash, three snowy peaks were bathed in moonlight. There might have been more lonely mountains further still, but Sunny could not see them.

Behind him, the entirety of the world was vast and empty, with only the sea of clouds swirling far below.

Sunny cursed quietly.

…Then, he cursed loudly.

'Three black volcanoes surrounded by pristine white peaks…'

"Goddammit!"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'I knew something like this would happen!'

He was fairly certain that he had been sucked into the Death Game.

Chapter-2311: Snow and Ash

'This… is a new one.'

Sunny studied the strange and magnificent landscape. The dark slopes of the fuming volcano drowned in falling ash, snowy peaks rose from the sea of clouds in the distance…

Darkness and moonlight were intertwined like an elegant ink painting.

A somber expression settled on his face.

'Snow and ash, huh?'

The white side of this Death Game seemed to be Snow, while the black side seemed to be Ash.

Considering that Sunny was standing on the central of the three volcanoes, he had become a warrior of Ash. And not just any warrior, at that — in the game that Ariel and the Jade Queen had left unfinished, the black figure on the middle black square was wearing a crown.

Which meant that Sunny had assumed the role of the Ash Tyrant.

He groaned quietly.

"Curse it all!"

There were only three black squares left on the board, while the other forty-six were white. There were also only three black figures left — the Tyrant and two Beasts — while the white side had twelve.

Somehow, Sunny could not imagine Ariel losing so miserably. So, it must have been the Jade Queen who had played Ash…

"Just how terrible were you at chess, damn it?!"

Sunny huffed in outrage, his heart overflowing with indignation. He was not sure what the future held, but there was a high chance that he would have to finish the game if he wanted to escape the dreadful jade board. That meant killing the Snow Tyrant from a woefully disadvantaged position.

Wasn't the Jade Queen supposed to be renowned for her wisdom? Couldn't she have left him more figures to fight with, at least?!

He exhaled slowly.

'Calm down.'

He did not know anything yet. Even if his suspicion was on point, there was no telling how this Death Game worked. Obviously, the laws governing the artificial realm had to be different from the rules of the actual game, even if they seemed to be based on it.

The battles between figures transpired according to the rules, for example — if the rules dictated that a figure had to lose, it would lose. But Sunny was not merely a figure… he was a person. A person who was notoriously difficult to kill and infamously lethal, no less.

So, he could very well manage to slay the enemy despite the rules dictating his defeat.

'Wait... the enemy?'

Sunny's already somber expression turned even darker.

Who was his enemy, exactly? The answer seemed obvious — it had to be the Snow Tyrant and the rest of the white pieces. But what were those pieces?

Since Sunny was not a figure, but a living being that the game board had imprisoned…

Then the rest of the figures could be the same.

Remembering the chilling depths of Corruption contained within the

beautiful jade board, he grimaced.

If the Snow figures were indeed living beings, they had to be powerful Nightmare Creatures. He had been surprised to see a well of appalling darkness greater and deeper than even the soul of Condemnation, but if its source was not one, but twelve ancient abominations… then it made sense.

'They are of the Great Rank, at least. Cursed Rank?'

Sunny sighed deeply.

What about the Ash figures, then?

He was the Ash Tyrant, but there had also been two Ash Beasts on the board. Were they Nightmare Creatures, too, or had someone else been brought into the Death Game with him?

Usually, Cassie would be able to serve as a messenger between him and his allies, but his mental connection with her seemed to have been broken.

Sunny hesitated for a while.

'First things first…'

Before considering how to win the Death Game, he had to make sure that there was no way to simply escape it. If there was, then he would have no reason to fight the Snow Abominations.

Or rather, fight them unprepared. Sunny was still determined to recover the piece of Weaver's lineage, and that piece was connected to the Snow Tyrant. Which meant that the Snow Tyrant and he would have to meet at some point.

Sunny slowly assessed the situation. His current state was quite anomalous, and it was time to address the issue now.

'How strange…'

The first anomaly was quite bizarre. It was that he could not sense what his other incarnations were sensing. Sunny had seven bodies,

but he only had one mind — so, that should not have been possible. And yet, it was.

He could not sense the shadows around his shades or around the members of the Shadow Clan, either. For the first time in a long while, his mind was quiet and desolate, populated by the senses of only a single avatar.

It was sort of peaceful.

Even his shadow sense was suppressed, enveloping only the part of the volcano that towered above the clouds.

'Damn Ariel… I really hate that guy. Each of his creations is worse than the previous one.'

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then sighed loudly.

'Well, I am sure that my other incarnations are doing just fine.'

More importantly, he could not feel a connection to his Domain. Actually, he could not even feel a connection to his source element — the shadows still welcomed him, but he was not receiving any spirit essence from them… or from his army of shades, for that matter.

Despite that, Sunny was connected to a Domain, and was being nourished by a source element. It was just that they were not his Domain and his source element.

Instead, it was…

'Ash?'

Well, that made sense. He was the Ash Tyrant, after all. It would be reasonable to assume that his power would grow the more peaks he conquered.

Currently, he only controlled three, while the Snow Tyrant controlled forty-six.

Sunny did not like these numbers at all.

'Moving on.'

He was quite curious about whether or not he could summon his shades. If he could, obliterating the Snow figures would be much easier…

But, alas, he couldn't. In fact, he could not even enter his Soul Sea, or summon Memories.

He could not summon his Shadows, either.

'Oh, come on!'

Sunny gritted his teeth.

After assessing the situation, he concluded that the situation was simply ridiculous.

"So, in conclusion…"

He was trapped in a game created by the Demon of Dread, stripped of his powers, his equipment, and his minions.

All he had was this one body and the shirt on his back… the proverbial shirt on his back, rather, since his clothes had been actually manifested from shadows.

These were the only resources available to him in order to deal with twelve ancient horrors, including the ominous Snow Tyrant.

Sunny lingered for a while, then smiled crookedly.

"This is quite unfair, isn't it?"

…For the Snow Tyrant, of course.

Whose bright idea had it been to invite the Heir of Death to play the Death Game?

Sunny shook his head.

Those fools did not know what was coming for them...

Chapter-2312: Rules of Engagement

Sunny could not extend his shadow sense to the neighboring volcanoes or to the snowy peaks in the distance, which meant that he could not use Shadow Step to reach them.

Of course, that alone could not stop him. If he wanted to, he could turn into a crow or weave wings out of shadows to fly to the lonesome mountains. He was not in a hurry to try, though…

The sea of clouds below gave him an ominous feeling.

'The laws governing this miniature realm seem to be based on the rules of the Death Game. Naturally, something as important as moving between the peaks should be subject to some kind of limitation.'

He remained motionless for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Let's conduct a little test, then."

Thrusting his odachi into the ground, Sunny let go of its hilt and crouched. His hand plunged into the shadows, and as he rose, a long javelin was formed by them, resting easily in his grip.

Sunny weighed the javelin in his hand and studied the white peak looming directly opposite the volcano, far in the distance. There were dozens of kilometers between the two, and the wind was quite severe…

Taking a step forward, Sunny turned his body into a sling and launched the javelin into the dark sky.

A deafening thunderclap rolled down the slopes of the volcano, and a

billowing cloud of ash rose into the air in a vast circle around him. Below Sunny, the dark surface of the weathered rock was revealed from under the ash — only to fracture immediately, a web of deep cracks spreading from under his feet.

The shadow javelin shot into the sky, sundering the veil of ash that obscured it and unleashing a torrent of pale moonlight. It was as if a silver line had been cut across the dark heavens.

Sunny watched it fly with a curious expression.

If he remembered correctly…

There were Beast figures on all three white squares facing the remaining black ones. So, a Snow Beast should be resting on the slopes of the snowy mountain the javelin was aimed at.

Sunny could not see that far, but the Snow Beast was still in for an unpleasant surprise. Even if the javelin landed nowhere near the creature, a comet charged with Supreme essence was about to hit the mountain.

The Beast would have to react in some way. That reaction alone would let Sunny learn more about the situation.

When the javelin breached about half of the distance to the snowy peak, however, he paled a little.

"Oh... my."

It was quite difficult to rattle Sunny, these days, but he had to admit that he had felt a cold chill running down his spine just then.

That was because when the javelin escaped from the clouds of ash, a colossal grey tentacle rose from the sea of clouds below, reaching higher than the mountains and the volcanoes, and easily swatted it away.

Then, the titanic tentacle swayed lightly and fell back, disappearing into the milky white clouds a dozen seconds later.

Its unfathomable mass created a breach in the swirling veil of clouds

for a few moments, but Sunny wisely decided not to try prying into what lay hidden below it.

Some things were not meant to be seen by mere mortals, and some were not meant to be seen even by Supreme demigods.

He remained motionless for a while, then sighed, retrieved his odachi, and placed it on his shoulder.

"Let's scratch the plan to explore the roots of the volcano, I guess."

Sunny was quite happy that he had decided to throw a javelin first before trying to fly to the distant white peak personally.

It seemed that he had been right to assume that there were laws governing the movement between the mountains. Not only that, but there was also an entity meant to enforce these laws.

He remembered the harrowing gaze that had once fallen on him in the heart of the Estuary of the Great River, judging his soul. The corpses of countless Great Nightmare Creatures, who had failed to pass the judgment, were floating in the dark water… but Sunny was allowed to pass unscathed.

The dreadful watcher had seemed unfathomably powerful to him as a Master… and now as a Supreme, Sunny still had no desire whatsoever to fight against another being serving the Demon of Dread.

He did not even want to know what that being was.

Still…

'There should be an allowed way to move between the mountains, though. I just need to discover it.'

For now, however, Sunny wanted to focus on something else. He wanted to explore the volcano, and especially the crumbling castle standing in the middle of its crater.

Just as he turned around, however, something unexpected happened.

He sensed a new shadow appearing on the dark slopes.

'Huh?'

And a few moments later, a familiar figure landed on the ground near him.

Ivory armor, auburn hair, electric green eyes… obnoxiously handsome face.

Sunny blinked a few times.

"Kai?"

Indeed, it was none other than Transcendent Nightingale, the Dragonslayer. The charming Saint looked no different from how he had been in the Toy Room, and when Sunny shifted his gaze to peer into the supposed Kai's soul, it was pure and radiant, with not a hint of Corruption hiding in its depths.

He did not seem like an evil doppelganger or an illusory construct, but like the real deal instead.

"Were you sucked into the Death Game, too?"

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? So that is what happened?"

Sunny simply stared.

"I'm pretty sure that it is, yeah. Why, what did you think had happened?"

Kai hesitated for a moment, then smiled.

"Well… I'm not sure. You told us to back away, and the next thing I knew, I was standing on a volcano. That one over there."

He pointed to one of the three volcanoes and added neutrally:

"I was honestly a bit disoriented. But then I saw the clouds of ash part, as if cut by something, and finally noticed you here. So, I flew

over."

Sunny shivered.

"…You flew over?"

Kai coughed.

"Yes. I was already in the air when that… that thing rose from the clouds. I guess I could have turned around at that point, but I would have had to slow down to make a turn. And honestly, seeing that tentacle made me want to fly faster than I had ever flown before."

Sunny let out a stunned chuckle.

"No kidding."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then smiled.

"Well, welcome to my volcano. You don't know how glad I am to see you, pawn… I mean, buddy! How glad I am to see you, buddy…"

Chapter-2313: Pawns of Ash

One of the questions seemed to have been answered. Kai was a Saint — a Transcendent Beast — so he took the place of one of the Ash Beasts that had remained on the Death Game board.

He had also traveled between the volcanoes without being erased from existence by the being below the clouds, which gave Sunny a hint about the rules of this miniature realm.

He would have to think about that in more detail, but for now, there was a more pressing question that needed to be answered.

Kai had been able to see Sunny across the great distance dividing the two volcanoes due to his Awakened Ability, which granted him unparalleled sight. So…

Sunny looked in the direction of the third volcano, wondering who had taken the place of the second Ash Beast.

"Can you see who is out there?"

Kai glanced in the direction of their volcano and faltered for a moment.

"That… I think you might want to take a step back."

Sunny frowned, then did as he was told.

A moment later…

A black arrow plummeted from the sky and sunk into the ash, right where he had been standing. Sunny stared at the arrow for a few moments, then shook his head.

He would have been able to dodge it even without Kai's warning… probably. But definitely not without rolling on the ground

gracelessly.

'That damn murderous lunatic…'

He inhaled deeply.

"I guess Slayer is here, too."

And it seemed that her eyesight was just as exceptional as Kai's… she lacked the ability to fly, though. So, she had announced her presence in her usual barbaric way.

Sunny pondered the situation.

There was a small possibility that the Song sisters were somewhere here, as well, having taken the place of three white figures. However, Sunny rather suspected that they had not been imprisoned by Ariel's game. If so, one question remained.

Where had the actual Ash Tyrant and two remaining Ash Beasts gone?

Looking at Kai, he hesitated a little and asked:

"Hey… do you think that Seishan, Hel, and Revel are fighting three ancient abominations in the Toy Room right now?"

Kai seemed startled by the question. He looked at Sunny with wide eyes, then shivered.

"I… really hope that they are not."

Sunny inhaled deeply.

"Well, don't worry too much. Seishan is quite resourceful, so I am sure she'll manage somehow."

After all, she had survived on the Forgotten Shore for a decade — longer than anyone else who escaped it. Revel, meanwhile, was one of the deadliest Saints in existence. Not only had she gone against Sunny and lived to tell the tale, but she also conquered the Spine Ocean of Godgrave while annihilating seven Saints of the Sword

Army and their entire expedition.

And while Death Singer was sort of disarming, she was actually quite terrifying as well. Sunny did not forget the first time he saw her, entering the council chamber of the Song Army with the same innocent look, but also with blood dripping from her crimson hands.

Plus, they were in the Jade Palace — their former home. Considering how well Revel knew the magnificent palace, they had an overwhelming terrain advantage.

Noticing that Kai still seemed worried, Sunny patted him on the shoulder.

"Cassie is keeping an eye on the situation. You know that she always has a contingency."

Kai lingered for a few moments, then nodded slowly.

"Still. Considering how serious the consequences are, I think I have the right to know what the purpose of this entire endeavor is, at least."

Sunny studied him with a faint smile.

"Finally ready to ask questions, huh? Well, fair. I'll tell you."

He looked into the distance, where the snowy peaks rose above the sea of clouds.

But what was he supposed to say?

Any honest answer he could give would be forgotten.

Eventually, Sunny said evenly:

"I guess I am searching for the key to the Nightmare Spell."

Kai's eyes widened a little.

"The key… to the Spell?"

Sunny nodded.

"It is easy to lose sight of the big picture because of all the immediate problems we are facing. The resettlement of humanity, the looming threat of total annihilation… even the race to Apotheosis. All of it is so great, so overwhelming, so all-consuming. But even while we are dealing with these eschatological issues, we mustn't forget about the ultimate goal."

Kai sighed.

"I am starting to grow tired of sounding like a parrot, but… ultimate goal?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Yes, the ultimate goal. Godhood."

He turned and looked at Kai without any humor in his lightless eyes.

"Humanity can only survive if new gods are born from it. Which means that someone has to conquer the Sixth Nightmare — the final Nightmare. Someone has to become Divine. Even Apotheosis is merely a stepping stone on the path to true godhood."

Sunny shook his head.

"But it is not that simple, is it? Now that we are mere men, we can allow ourselves to follow the Path of Ascension blindly. But if we dare become gods, we have to dare look upon the gods as equals… instead of merely being their puppets. We must be willing to not only question the will of the gods, but also to endure the weight of the answers we find."

Kai frowned, confused by his words.

"...Which gods?"

Sunny laughed quietly.

"All of them… but one first and foremost. Weaver, that nebulous knave — the chief puppeteer of this whole affair. Why did Weaver create the Nightmare Spell? How? To what end? All of us are following the road that Weaver built, and at this point, we can't

afford to ignore the mystery of why it was built, and what is waiting for us at the road's end."

Kai looked at the distant snowy peaks, lingered for a few moments, and asked:

"And the answer to that question… is here? In this strange realm that Ariel created?"

Sunny sighed.

"A piece of the answer, at least. That is what I believe."

He glanced at Kai and shrugged.

"I mentioned Weaver's Lineage earlier. That lineage, you see, is a cursed thing that should have never existed in the world. And yet, Weaver scattered it across the tapestry of fate for us to find. That daemon never did anything without a reason, so it is my belief that there is a reason why they unleashed this curse upon the world."

There seemed to be no reason whatsoever for Weaver to have left behind a cursed Lineage, unless it was for the purpose of destroying the world. There were easier ways to destroy the world for someone like Weaver, though, so Sunny did not believe that Weaver's cursed Lineage existed for that reason.

Flaws were seen as curses, as well… and they were. However, Flaws also pushed those who carried them to grow and improve. In that sense, they were blessings.

The description of his lost [Fated] Attribute had said that there were those who were blessed, and there were those who were cursed — however, rarely was there someone who was both blessed and cursed.

But actually, every Awakened was both blessed and cursed, existing in a state of fateful balance.

Perhaps Weaver's had been forced to maintain the same balance, too. Perhaps the Demon of Fate had wanted to bless the world, but could only do so by leaving a curse behind as well.

The Nightmare Spell, the forbidden lineage…

Which one was a curse? Which one was a blessing?

Perhaps Weaver's cursed Lineage was the Spell's Flaw.

Chapter-2314: Pawns of Snow

Sunny remained silent for a while, then chuckled.

"Well, whatever it is, we'll find out sooner or later — as long as we live long enough."

He considered his next steps.

Kai, meanwhile, was studying him with a complicated expression.

"So you are searching for pieces of a daemon's Lineage?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. And one of those pieces is somehow connected to the Snow Tyrant. Speaking of…"

He hesitated for a moment, then asked:

"You saw me from all the way on that other volcano. And you can see Slayer, too. So… can you see what is waiting for us on those three mountains, as well?"

Kai opened his mouth, then closed it again and looked into the distance. After a while, he said in a subdued tone:

"Yeah. I see them."

'Bingo.'

Now, he would at least know what they would have to face.

Sunny leaned on his odachi lazily and asked, his voice calm:

"There should be three Snow Beasts on those mountains. What do they look like?"

Kai hurriedly looked away, as if someone out there stared back at him. He shivered, then brushed his hair back and straightened.

"Right in front of us… the whole mountain is riddled with caves, like an enormous ice beehive. Inside, a swarm of insect-like abominations is slowly coming to life, each of them seemingly carved from gemstones. They look frightful, if a little mindless."

Sunny's face fell.

'Huh.'

"So a single figure can represent a whole swarm of abominations, not just a lone Beast. I see. What of the other two mountains?"

Kai frowned.

"The one on the right… there's a statue standing on its peak. No, not a statue… more of an automaton, I guess? A clockwork knight. Actually, he looks like the giant version of one of the toy knights we saw in the Toy Room. I feel an enormous amount of dread when looking at him, though. That one… is not a simple Nightmare Creature, I think."

This time, it was Sunny's turn to frown.

'If a single abomination makes Kai more wary than a swarm of them, then it must be powerful. A Cursed Beast? It's possible.'

"And what is on the third mountain?"

Kai shivered.

"There is a worm-like creature there. Actually, it's not on the mountain… it's inside the mountain. This creature is simply enormous — it seemed to have hollowed out the entire mountain and made a nest inside of it, coiling into a sphere. It took me a while to realize what that colossal mass of flesh was."

A sour expression appeared on Sunny's face.

'A giant ice worm, huh.'

He had just come from months of battling giant millipedes. He had really had enough of worm-like creatures.

Sunny sighed.

"I'm guessing that one is a Cursed One, as well."

A swarm of Great abominations and two fallen deities… and these were some of the weakest Snow figures on the board.

The first battles of the Death Game promised to be quite unpleasant.

Sunny looked at Kai.

"What is your condition? I mean… how weird is it?"

Kai seemed to understand what he meant.

"My Aspect is entirely unaffected. However, I can't enter my soul sea, my source element seems to have switched to ash, and on top of that, I can't summon any Memories — only those I was wearing when the game snatched us are left. That is… just my armor."

Sunny nodded silently.

"So you are completely unarmed?"

Kai nodded in discomfort.

"Yes. I can still assume my Transcendent form, though. So… that's something."

He said that, but he was wrong. It would have been fine to engage the enemies as a dragon in most other situations, but here, the enemies were much stronger than Kai. He could probably fight a Great abomination… but not a Cursed One.

At least not at a close distance.

If he had a good bow and arrows, though, he could at least assist Sunny from afar — Kai was an archer of sublime skill, after all, second only to Slayer herself.

Sadly, he was in the same predicament as Sunny. Ariel's Game had sealed their soul arsenals, somehow.

Sunny sighed.

'It's a good thing that I weaned myself off overly relying on Memories. Kai is a different story, though.'

"Alright. I get it."

What had he found out?

There were powerful enemies on the three snowy peaks facing the three volcanoes. Moving from the volcanoes to the peaks, and vice versa, was prohibited at the moment… however, moving between the mountains of the same Domain seemed to be allowed.

There was an important difference from the actual Death Game he could not overlook, too. It was that Kai was currently standing next to him. If he was simply moving figures across the game board, two game pieces would not have been able to occupy the same square.

'There has to be a way to make an actual move.'

In other words, if some conditions were met, he would be able to attack the Snow Abominations… but since Sunny did not know the laws governing this miniature world, yet, it was far more probable that the Snow Abominations would attack him first.

Rather, they would either make a move to attack the Ash Tyrant, or attempt to conquer the remaining volcanoes first.

Seishan had mentioned that there were special squares in some versions of the Death Game. Squares with a Castle, for example, never changed color… if the crumbling fortress on this volcano was one such castle, then the Snow Tyrant could attempt to conquer the other two volcanoes to prepare for the final siege.

"Are there any structures on the volcano you came from or on the one where my Shadow is currently waiting to be rescued?"

Kai shook his head.

"Not that I can see."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded slowly.

"Alright. Then, do me a favor please… go to the next volcano over and bring that murderous woman here. Whatever happens next, we'll have a better chance to survive it together."

Kai smiled.

"No problem."

A moment later, before Sunny had time to say anything else, he was already flying away.

"She's not going to kill him, right? Right. She wouldn't."

Wouldn't she?

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Why am I worried? If I need to worry about something, it's that Slayer might become one of Kai's fangirls too!'

Shaking his head, he sat down on the ground and reached into the shadows.

'...I won't give her any more of my blood if she does. Kai can give her his if he wants!'

Above him, the wound his javelin had dealt to the veil of ash that obscured the sky was already repairing itself, and the world was once again submerging in darkness.

Chapter-2315: Army of Three

While Kai was away retrieving Slayer — and hopefully not being killed by her — Sunny was busy as well.

He was making a bow for Kai, manifesting it from the shadows.

One would think that making a bow was quite simple. All Sunny needed was to manifest a long narrow bar and make it bendy, then string it. Of course, manipulating the internal structure of manifested shadows to imbue them with a suitable level of elasticity actually demanded an intricate level of Shadow Manifestation mastery — but Sunny was more than capable of doing just that.

Once, he could barely control the outward shape of manifested shadows, but by now, he could make them into pretty much anything he wanted.

However, there was a difference between simply making a bow and making it worthy of a Transcendent archer.

It was not even a matter of enchanting the bow. Before that, the structure of the bow itself demanded careful consideration — Sunny had studied that obscure craft in the past, and he delved into it even deeper while crafting bows for Rain and Slayer.

For example, there was the choice between a more traditional recurve bow and a more advanced compound bow. Compound bows offered more power and convenience, but Sunny had shied away from crafting them in the past due to how difficult they were to maintain and care for in field conditions.

A weapon needed to not only be deadly, but also reliable. Especially so in the Dream Realm, where the environment itself was often the enemy.

These had been his considerations in the past, but now that Sunny was armed with the knowledge of how the nature of a weapon affected its capacity to carry Will, he also suspected that wielding a compound bow would be a detriment to a Transcendent archer.

But even if he wanted to create a recurve bow, which was much simpler in structure and was therefore a more faithful emissary of the archer's will, things weren't simple either.

That was because, in his opinion, a good recurve bow had to be a composite one. Instead of a single length of wood, it had to be composed of layers of different materials, all glued together for optimal results.

The simplest composition started with a wooden core, a softer wood used for the bending parts of the limbs, and stiffer wood used for their tips. Then thin plates of horn, which stored energy better when compressed, would be glued to the belly of the bow. Finally, animal sinew, which possessed greater elasticity than wood, would be glued to the back of the bow.

All of that allowed for more energy to be stored when the bow was drawn, and for that energy to be released in a more optimal way when the string was released, resulting in more powerful and deadly shots.

So, Sunny had to carefully manipulate the manifested shadows to imbue them with qualities that resembled different types of wood, horn, and sinew… actually, since he did not have to limit himself to only reproducing naturally existing materials, he could play around with these qualities to achieve the best result.

Luckily, he had already done his research when crafting a bow for Slayer. He also had a good idea of how strong Kai was, exactly — so, he could create a truly powerful weapon for his friend.

Additionally, there was a matter of how he wanted to manifest the shadows. Making them permanent would be easier, since he would not have to maintain their shape either consciously or constantly… but that way, the bow would be much weaker, somewhere between the Ascended and Transcendent Ranks. So, Sunny decided to sustain

the manifestation personally.

That way, Kai would be wielding an ostensibly Supreme weapon — something he would need desperately before too long, no doubt.

Manifesting the varied types of shadows into proper shapes and fusing them together was an intricate task. Sunny worked meticulously, using his two hands to craft the weapon. At the same time, he used four more hands to weave strings of shadow essence.

He could not enchant the bow just yet since there were no soul shards in his possession to anchor a weave, but a few would hopefully fall into his hands soon. Sunny wanted to be prepared for when that happened.

'Look at me… am I not the most benevolent of Tyrants? Who else would sit on the ground and personally craft weapons for their pawns?'

He chuckled.

But that was simply the first step. Here inside Ariel's Game, Sunny was a general in charge of an army. His army consisted of only two soldiers, but it was still a start.

He would arm his soldiers, empower them, and lead them to conquer the entire board.

By the time a magnificent dragon with scales as dark as midnight landed on the slope of the fuming volcano, carrying a beautiful Shadow on his back, the bow was almost ready. Slayer jumped down with the grace of a dancer, walked over to where Sunny was sitting, and silently retrieved her arrow from the ash.

Her gaze was as cold ever, full of hidden malice.

As soon as Kai assumed his human form, Sunny tossed him the bow.

"Here. String it."

Kai caught the black bow and stared at it for a few moments, his eyes widening slightly.

"What a fearsome aura…"

Placing one end of the bow on the ground, he used his shin to secure it and bent the long bow with seeming ease, stringing it in one smooth motion.

Of course, in truth, bending it was not easy at all. People usually assumed that archers were less imposing than swordsmen, as far as physical power went, but really, it was the opposite. An average archer had to be far stronger than a melee fighter since drawing a powerful bow demanded immense strength — and Kai, despite his deceptively elegant appearance, had never been merely an average archer.

'...Poser.'

Witnessing how unburdened the charming Saint looked while stringing the Supreme bow, Sunny almost regretted not making it even more potent. However, he knew that Kai was simply showcasing perfect technique… naturally, his chiseled muscles were taut and straining under the ivory armor, his veins bulging.

A drop of sweat that rolled down the charming Saint's face was proof.

Shaking his head, Sunny looked at Slayer.

"Hey. How about you share some arrows with this handsome young man?"

Instead of answering, Slayer raised the arrow she was still holding in her hand and silently moved it across her neck.

Her message was clear…

"Want to die?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Alright, alright. Gods!"

Reaching into the shadows once again, he went about crafting deadly arrows.

Now, creating a good arrow was also not an easy feat. But luckily, Sunny had had a lot of practice.

Looking at Kai, he smiled.

"You know… one time, I was falling into a flaming sea. So, I drew my bow, and shot myself out of it. Worked like a charm!"

He was referring to his fall into the Sky Below, of course, and the desperate attempt to avoid burning in the sea of divine flames by wrapping his shadow around a flying arrow and using Shadow Step to appear next to it.

Kai had been studying his new bow with an enamored expression. That expression swiftly crumbled.

Looking at Sunny with trembling eyes, he said:

"Wait, wait… this one does not even make sense! How can it be true?!"

Sunny looked at him with reproach.

"Do not question the truth, Nightingale. The truth does not exist to be convenient, nor does it need to be sensible. It simply has to be true…"

Chapter-2316: Winning Strategy

While crafting arrows, Sunny picked one up with a shadow hand and used it to draw a grid in the ash.

Seven rows of seven squares each… forty-nine in total.

Then, he marked some of the squares with various runes.

Sunny had not paid a lot of attention to the placement of the figures on the jade board, but he could still recall it flawlessly. There were also five squares marked by special carvings — one at the very center of the board, and one at the middle squares of each outer row.

Eventually, he pointed to the grid and spoke.

"This is what the game board looked like in the Toy Room. As you can see, the Ash Domain is on the verge of losing. We only have three squares left, occupied by the Ash Tyrant — that is me — and two Ash Beasts. That is you and Slayer."

He pointed to the three squares in the lowest row of the grid. Since one of them was the middle square of an outer row, it was marked with a special rune.

"You should have seen the fortress behind us. I think that it is the Ash Castle — one of the special squares Seishan mentioned. There is a similar carving on the opposite square, so this is where the Snow Castle should be."

Sunny pointed the arrow to the middle square of the uppermost row.

"However, the carvings on the other three special squares are different. They are not Castles, but what are they? I do not know. The one in the very middle of the board is different from the two on the left and right outer rows, as well."

Sunny sighed.

"Well, we'll learn eventually. What is more important is where the twelve Snow Abominations are standing. Do you see a pattern?"

Kai studied the grid.

On it, three Snow Beasts were facing the three remaining Ash figures. On the opposite side of the board, the Snow Tyrant was standing in the Snow Castle, defended by a Snow Devil and two Snow Beasts in the row below. The second Snow Devil was guarding the central square of the board. A Snow Demon and two Snow Monsters were defending the middle square on the right outer row.

And finally, the last Snow figure — another Demon — was in the lower left corner, all by itself.

Kai frowned.

"It looks to me like… three Beasts are preparing to besiege the Ash Castle, while the rest of the figures are protecting important squares on the board. Three are protecting the Snow Castle and their Tyrant, three are protecting whatever that right middle square is, one is protecting the heart of the map. And one seems to have lost its way and wandered into a corner."

Sunny grinned.

"Exactly."

Kai stared at him for a while, then asked:

"So?"

Sunny looked at him meaningfully.

"...How should I know? Do I look like a great chess player to you?"

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"You're not?"

Sunny scoffed.

"No, I am not. To be honest, as soon as I understood what it takes to be good at playing chess, I instantly lost interest. Let me tell you… it's not a game, it's a chore! Why would I waste my time mastering something so tedious?"

He shook his head.

Playing chess with Teacher Julius had been fun and exciting at the beginning, but when Sunny realized that it was all about patterns and calculations, he swiftly grew bored. After all, he did enough calculating in his actual life, already.

The chaotic mayhem of checkers seemed more fun. And of course, nothing beat the noble king of games, backgammon…

Because there were countless ways to cheat when throwing dice, which was the funnest part.

Sunny looked at Kai.

"Why? Are you good at chess?"

Kai scratched the tip of his nose.

"Not really. To be honest, being serious about chess takes a lot of time. And I, uh… always had better ways to spend my time."

Sunny looked at him with suspicion.

'Did he just politely point out... that he had a life?'

Well, naturally! That guy had probably been too popular to be the president of the chess club. If Kai had been the president of any club, it would have probably been the heartthrob club.

Shaking his head, Sunny sighed.

"So, none of us knows anything about how to win at chess. Plus, this is not even chess… this is Death Game. Actually, it is a bizarre version of the Death Game created by Ariel, which functions

according to its own set of rules. We do not know these rules yet, so it will be hard to come up with a strategy."

He stared at the grid, a somber expression on his face.

But then, Sunny stirred.

"Actually…"

He turned his head and looked at Slayer, who was idly standing a few steps away from them.

"I was not entirely correct. There is someone among us who might know everything about how to play Death Game."

Slayer was the shadow of a person who had lived in the Dream Realm thousands of years ago. Since Death Game had been popular among her people, she might have very well been a masterful player.

Sunny scrutinized her for a while, then asked hopefully:

"Hey. Do you know how to play the Death Game? What is the best strategy?"

Was victory even possible when forty-six of the forty-nine squares already belonged to the Snow Domain?

Slayer turned her head and looked down at him, her inky-black eyes betraying no emotion.

Sunny almost lost hope when she suddenly moved, looking at the grid he had drawn.

The Shadow remained motionless for a while, then used the arrow in her hand to carve a rune in the ash.

Kai looked at the rune with curiosity.

"...Sacrifice?"

Sunny nodded slowly.

"Yes… sacrifice. To be precise, it's a particular kind of sacrifice. A

sacrificial killing."

So, the strategy Slayer recommended… was slaying someone as a sacrifice.

Kai frowned.

"Is she suggesting that you should sacrifice one of your pawns?"

Sunny was looking at the grid. Eventually, he slowly shook his head.

"No… I don't think so. Do you remember what else Seishan said? That there are special squares in certain versions of Death Game called Shrines. There, enemy figures can be sacrificed to enhance your own."

If the Shrines were important enough for Slayer to point at them as the secret of achieving victory… then the Snow Tyrant would put a lot of importance into protecting the Shrines, as well.

From that, Sunny could deduce which of the five special squares hid the Shrines.

'If I am not mistaken, they are the middle squares of the right and left outer rows.'

Sunny looked at Slayer and smiled.

"So... you can write, huh?"

She just stared at him silently.

Sunny chuckled, then asked in a teasing tone:

"Well, then, can you please spell it out for us… how do we win this damn game?"

Slayer regarded him silently for a moment, then leaned forward.

The tip of her arrow plunged into the ash, pierced the square where the Snow Castle stood, and destroyed the runes describing the Snow Tyrant.

Sunny stared at the arrow for a few moments, and then grinned.

"Figures…"

Chapter-2317: Worm of Doubt

Sunny let out a long sigh, then fell into contemplation. He studied the grid for a while, his eyes hidden in deep shadow… eventually, though, he looked at Kai.

"We lack information about the rules of this world, and trying to learn more about it through trial and error seems too dangerous. This places us in an unfortunately passive position. We have no choice — no better choice, at least — than to wait for the enemy to make their move. We will be able to understand more about Ariel's Game by watching the Snow Abominations act."

He grimaced.

"You mentioned that the insects in the ice hive seemed to be slowly awakening, while the other two Beasts have not moved yet. It is not surprising, really, considering that they must have spent thousands of years imprisoned in this game. But… now that we are here, they'll probably come to their senses soon."

Sunny considered Kai for a few moments, then asked:

"In the meantime… you led soldiers in your Second Nightmare and in Antarctica, didn't you? You also spent enough time with Morgan to learn a thing or two from her. What do you think our strategy should be?"

Kai raised an eyebrow and hesitated for a few moments.

"I… am a bit surprised to hear about my Second Nightmare from you, Sunny. But if you know what happened to us in the Kingdom of Hope, you know that the only thing I led my soldiers to was their deaths. As for Antarctica, my role there was merely that of a tactical commander. Our broader strategy was usually decided by the Army HQ."

Sunny smiled.

"Nightingale… Kai, my friend. I know that you are plagued by insecurity, but please, for the love of gods, don't let it fester into an inferiority complex on my account. Excessive modesty is not a flattering look for a distinguished gentleman — even one as dashing as you. So cut it out and take accountability for your accomplishments, for once."

Kai looked at him, a strange emotion hidden in his beautiful green eyes.

Sunny sighed.

The charming Saint was often too nice for his own good, but that was not his only character flaw. He was also unsure of himself, deep down. Sunny knew that Kai had always felt somewhat insecure about his place in the cohort… and as a result, in the broader world.

He could understand these doubts, to a degree. After all, the members of Changing Star's cohort were exceptional individuals, each and every one of them — ever since the Forgotten Shore. There was Nephis herself, Cassie and her prophetic gift, Sunny and his Fated encounters, and Effie, who had survived years hunting alone on the streets of the Dark City.

Later, there was also Soul Reaper Jet — a Master whom even Saints feared.

In comparison, Kai was a far more mundane individual. He had survived the perils of the Dark City behind the walls of the Bright Castle, earning soul shards to pay Gunlaug's tribute by selling his rare Aspect Ability. In a sense, he was more similar to someone like Aiko than to the exalted warriors around him.

And yet, Kai had risen to the occasion every time his help had been needed — for no other reason than his innate integrity and principles. He was not driven by an overwhelming obsession or forced into action by inescapable fate… instead, he simply did his best to do what he felt was the right thing to do.

From the dreadful reaches of the Forgotten Shore to the dark expanse of the Tomb of Ariel, he elevated himself step by step until there was hardly a handful of people in the world who could say that they had accomplished more, and endured more, than Saint Nightingale — the valiant Dragonslayer.

It was just that Kai's opinion of himself never seemed to catch up to his accomplishments.

Sunny may not have liked that his friend was always selling himself short, but there was little he could do about it. After all, there was some truth to what Kai thought about himself — it would have been hard for anyone, not just him, to contend against inexplicable monsters like Sunny, Nephis, or other powerhouses in their orbit.

But now… now, Kai's insecurity was not merely undeserved, it was an actual problem. Sovereigns were arrogant by nature, after all — they had to be. Only someone supremely confident in their cause could be bold enough to force their will upon the world.

How could someone who doubted himself convince the world to submit?

So, Sunny hoped to disabuse Kai of the preposterous notion that he was somehow less deserving than the rest of them.

'Ah, I'm really not the right person for this job...'

Actually, he was arguably the worst choice — after all, Sunny had never been great at dealing with people. He was so atrocious at it, in fact, that he had even ended up living alone in seclusion and slowly losing his mind multiple times in his life.

But at the same time, he was also the best choice.

Because Kai was keenly aware of lies and insincerity, while Sunny never lied.

Kai looked at him with a strange expression for a while.

Eventually, he asked in a cautious tone:

"Sunny… you think that I'm dashing?"

Sunny blinked a few times.

"T—that… that is your main takeaway?!"

He exhaled slowly through gritted teeth.

"Bastard, are you fishing for compliments now? Sure, yes, I do think that. Your style is impeccable, and your face is a weapon of mass destruction. Happy now?!"

Kai smiled brilliantly.

"Why, thank you! It really means a lot, coming from the owner of the Eye Candy Ca…"

"Shut up!"

Sunny huffed and pointed to the map of Ariel's Game.

"Strategy! Remember?"

Kai kept smiling for a few moments, then turned to the grid drawn in the ash. A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

"We really don't know much about how this game works, but generally… the mountain we are occupying is the Castle, which suggests some kind of defensive advantage. Common logic dictates that we should make use of these fortifications to repel the enemy, but actually, such a strategy will simply become our death. Since the enemy forces are so overwhelming, locking ourselves into a defensive strategy will merely postpone our defeat."

Sunny nodded.

Kai was, without a doubt, right on that account.

Chapter-2318: A New Paradigm

Trying to defend the Ash Castle was a losing strategy.

They could potentially deal with the three Snow Beasts, but that would take time. And in that time, more powerful figures would most likely reach the Ash Castle, leading to a checkmate.

Sunny had grown used to dealing with problems by using overwhelming strength as of late. But here in Ariel's game, he was once again weak — he did not have his shades, his Shadows, his Memories. He did not even have a single shadow to augment himself.

If a couple of Demons of a high enough Rank showed up, surrounded by Monsters and Beasts, his end would be swift and inevitable. In order to survive, Sunny had to act with cunning and foresight.

He narrowed his eyes and asked Kai calmly:

"So, what should we do?"

Kai shrugged.

"The same thing Ki Song did at Greater Crossing, I guess. Abandon the fortified position and attack instead, aiming to crush the enemy forces while they are isolated from each other."

He looked at Sunny with curiosity and asked:

"Am I correct?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"You are not exactly wrong, but you are also not exactly right either."

He sighed and pointed to where Slayer's arrow was sticking from the ash.

"Slayer seems to understand the essence of this conflict better. You see, Kai, your answer is based on sound military paradigm, but it is an obsolete military paradigm — one formed by thousands of years of war and conflict in the waking world. The reality of our world has changed, though… but our thinking has not been quick enough to adapt."

He pointed to the grid.

"I hear that chess is a game that is supposed to represent a military conflict — a mundane military conflict. Death Game, however, is a game that represents a supernatural military conflict, one where Demons and Devils play the role of soldiers. And of course, there is a Tyrant."

This time, Sunny pointed to himself.

"In a mundane war, destroying the enemy army is a primary goal — after all, it is tantamount to victory. But in a world infected by the Nightmare Spell, an individual can possess greater power than an army. The army is merely a tool that the Tyrant uses. It exists for convenience. Therefore, the primary goal is to destroy the Tyrant."

Sunny looked at the runes describing the three Snow Beasts.

"In other words, your very premise is wrong — because you see the act of destroying the enemy forces as inherently valuable. But in fact, it is not. It is only valuable if killing them brings us closer to slaying the Snow Tyrant, and if it doesn't, then there's no point in fighting with them at all."

He smiled.

"Which is not to say that killing them is entirely useless. It's just… of minor importance. Or it would have been, if not for one detail — a detail that makes killing these Beasts actually detrimental to us."

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"I can somewhat follow your logic in that fighting the Snow Abominations might not have any value for our current situation. But… detrimental? Surely, removing them from the board will at

least give us more breathing room. Plus, no matter how powerful the Snow Tyrant is, the Snow Tyrant surrounded by the Snow Army would still be more powerful."

Sunny nodded.

"Sure. But you are forgetting the initial point Slayer made."

He gestured to the rune the silent Shadow had drawn in the ash.

"Sacrifice. There is actually a way to kill the Snow Abominations that will make us stronger. Because of that, killing them in any other way will actually be no different from depriving ourselves of power — power we desperately need to kill the Snow Tyrant."

Next, he pointed to the squares on the edges of the grid where the Shrines usually stood. One was defended by several Snow figures, while the other one was empty.

"Killing our enemies at first opportunity holds close to no value. In fact, it holds negative value. Just because we can slay them does not mean we should… unless we slay them in one of these Shrines. Do you understand now?"

Kai remained silent for a long time, thinking.

Eventually, he asked in a subdued tone:

"Are you sure you're not a great chess player, Sunny?"

Sunny scoffed.

"What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with chess. It's just common logic."

Kai gave him a dubious look.

"I wouldn't call such logic common, though."

Then, he turned and looked at Slayer with curiosity.

"It is also impressive that your… employee… was able to not only

fathom the essence of this game, but also explain it by writing a single rune and plunging her arrow into the ash. She is quite eloquent."

Sunny could not help but laugh. Actually, he almost toppled over from laughter.

"Oh? Do you admire her now? I see you have a type… my employees..."

He grinned.

"Be careful, though. This one is a real heartbreaker. Actually, that's how we met."

Kai looked at him in confusion.

"She… broke your heart?"

Sunny nodded energetically.

"Exactly! Well, to be precise, she put an arrow through my heart. Hurt like hell."

Turning to Slayer, Sunny smiled pleasantly.

"But don't worry. The next time we met, we tussled inside a dead god… who was walking around inside the corpse of another, greater dead god… and when the dead god crumbled, I returned the favor. By killing her. Oh, and after I killed her, we fought for about another year, this time inside my own soul. I even died myself in the meantime. Quite a rigorous selection process, as you can see! But how else can one find good employees?"

Kai stared at him blankly.

Meeting his hollow gaze, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What? Do you use a different recruitment method for the Nightsingers?"

Kai closed his eyes for a moment and asked, his voice devoid of all

emotions:

"Sunny, can I ask you something?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Sure. You can."

Kai inhaled deeply.

"Do you, perhaps, suffer from some kind of mental illness?"

Sunny frowned.

"What? Of course not."

When Kai exhaled slowly, he added with a smile:

"Suffering from mental illnesses? How trite. If anything, mental illnesses suffer from me…"

Kai's eyes trembled.

Chapter-2319: Educational Trip

Looking at Kai, Sunny felt a profound sense of amusement. However, that amusement came and went swiftly.

Letting out a sigh, he looked up. The firmament of the miniature realm was obscured by the clouds of ash, but it was clear above the snowy peaks. It seemed like the moon was descending… the night would be over soon, making way for the brilliance of the day.

Somehow, Sunny felt that this short moment of peace was not going to last much longer than the night.

'What will the Snow Tyrant do?'

And what could the Snow Tyrant do?

Actually, Sunny was aware of the subtle strangeness of his situation. He had assumed the place of the Ash Tyrant… who was a figure of vital importance, no doubt, but merely a figure nonetheless.

Sunny was not the player.

His suspicion that there was a distinction between the two was based on a couple of facts. First of all, if the players of Ariel's Game were supposed to act as Tyrants of their respective Domains… then there would be no Snow Tyrant anywhere in this artificial world — after all, the original players of the game were long gone.

Secondly, his status as the Ash Tyrant had not granted Sunny any new powers — including the power to control lesser Ash figures. Kai and Slayer were not compelled to obey him because of the nature of the game, they simply listened to him because he was Sunny.

Similarly…

If there was a Snow Tyrant on the opposite end of the board, would they have any control over the Snow Abominations?

He was not sure.

Depending on the answer, though, Sunny was facing two entirely different perils.

If the Snow Tyrant could control the figures freely, then he would be facing a coordinated and lethal force. This game would be a battle of two minds. If not… the Beasts would roam free, and the main obstacle standing in his way would be this artificial realm itself.

"We'll see soon."

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Sunny let out another sigh.

"We'll see what kind of battle this is once the Snow Abominations start to move."

He looked at the three snowy peaks.

"If they are mere Beasts, they'll rush to devour us straight away. If they are minions of a Tyrant, though… they'll conquer the other two volcanoes first, to enhance the Snow Domain and weaken the Ash Domain as much as possible before the final siege. Our response will differ drastically depending on what they'll do."

He created a needle out of shadows and went about finishing a quiver for Kai. Less than a minute later, it was done.

Sunny placed the arrows he had crafted into the quiver and offered it to the charming archer with a smile.

"Here… this will do for now."

Standing up, Sunny brushed the ash off his clothes and pointed to the pillar of smoke rising into the sky behind them.

"We should probably explore the castle while we can."

As they descended into the crater, Sunny glanced at Kai, and then asked calmly:

"You have some experience fighting Great Nightmare Creatures, yes?"

Kai nodded.

"Yes. As a government Saint, during the war in Bastion, and later as the steward of Ravenheart… I've faced a few."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"How was it?"

Kai's expression grew somber.

"...Like fighting gods."

He remained silent for a few moments, then added with a sigh:

"The Great Ones… are stronger and more fearsome than abominations of lesser Ranks, true. But I've long grown used to fighting against enemies who are superior to me in all regards. The problem is that facing them feels different from a normal battle. It is as if the world itself is on their side."

Sunny nodded.

"The world is indeed on their side — because they force the world to be on their side. What separates those Great and Supreme from those of lesser Ranks is the quality of our will. Our will is tyrannical enough to subjugate the world… to some degree, at least. Well, you must know all that already — after all, both Nephis and I spent quite a lot of time sharing our experience with Cassie, who then compiled a report for those who need to know."

Kai looked at Sunny with a distant expression.

"Yes, I know. However... I am sorry to say this, Sunny, but I don't think that anyone else will be able to repeat what you two have done

— attaining Supremacy naturally, I mean. That… that is not my self-doubt talking. It's just that you and Nephis often underestimate how exceptional you are. Underestimating it woefully."

Sunny pursed his lips.

Kai, meanwhile, let out a sigh.

"...Which means that the rest of us will have to do it the usual way. We will have to challenge the Fourth Nightmare."

Sunny studied him for a while, then looked away.

"Only four people have ever survived the Fourth Nightmare. You will face Great Nightmare Creatures there, too… so, think of this little excursion of ours as a practice run. I'll handle the Cursed Ones, if we have to face any, but the Great abominations will be on you. I'm sure you'll manage — after all, I…"

Sunny wanted to mention how he had killed a Great Devil as a Sleeper, but held himself back for once. Now was not time for jokes.

"I'll have your back. You have two perfect teachers with you, anyway. I am a Supreme myself, while she…"

He pointed to Slayer.

"She is probably the most prolific killer I have ever met. Not only that, but her main killing tool is a bow, as well. So watch her carefully, and learn from her."

There was really no better role model for Kai than Slayer. So, Sunny had high hopes for him.

Having two exceptional archers assisting him against the Snow Abomination sounded like a dream, too — he was rarely pampered by having such support.

Kai smiled.

"I will."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, thinking what else to say.

It was not a matter of motivating Kai to do his best — he had never lacked motivation. It was more of a matter of showing him a perspective that would make him want to do more than his best. To have the will to succeed no matter what.

This was the only way to survive in the ruthless world of the Nightmare Spell.

Eventually, Sunny asked:

"Your Nightmares. How did you survive them?"

Kai contemplated his question for a while, then answered with a faint smile:

"I survived because of the people who were by my side."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. Because no one survives in the Dream Realm alone."

He looked at Kai and added evenly:

"But to those people, you were and will be the person by their side. Their survival will depend on you, just like your survival will depend on theirs."

Kai's expression changed subtly, and his smile disappeared.

Witnessing that change, Sunny looked away.

"So, how many more people will survive the Fourth Nightmare in the future is up to you. Take responsibility."

Kai remained silent for a long time, then nodded silently.

By then, they had reached the crumbling castle.

Chapter-2320: Ash Castle

The Ash Castle was a strange and towering structure. It was built above the main vent of the volcano, seemingly hovering in the air. At first glance, it seemed as if its immense weight was supported by nothing except the rising torrents of smoke… but at a closer glance, Sunny saw enormous chains biting into the dark rock of the crater, covered in thick layers of soot.

The castle was hanging above the abyss, the smoke-filled emptiness serving as its moat.

The defensive value of such a structure was questionable, to say the least. Sure, any attacker would plummet into the fiery depths of the volcano unless they found a way to breach the wide chasm, but at the same time, the defenders would find it difficult to prevent the enemy from destroying the anchors of the chains that held the castle in the air.

Extending his shadow sense into the abyssal vent, Sunny sensed more chains fastening the castle to its walls further down. There seemed to be some kind of mechanism built into the obsidian plate that served as the foundation for the charred fortress, now broken and in a state of disrepair.

'...Was this castle able to descend into the depths of the volcano once?'

Even if it had been, it was stuck in place now, barely able to support its own weight.

Sunny imagined the whole structure plummeting into the smoke under their feet. That would be troublesome… but not too troublesome. After all, he could fly away at any moment.

The drawbridge of the castle was raised, so Sunny manifested two

raven-black wings and offered Slayer a hand. She looked at it coldly, while Kai smiled.

"I see you are a gentleman…"

As Slayer took his hand, Sunny strained his muscles and tossed her into the air. The nimble Shadow shot over the chasm like a bullet, disappearing into the smoke — a few moments later, she landed on one of the crumbling towers of the castle, twirled to regain her balance, and summoned her bow in one graceful motion.

Her skirt flared, and by the time its hem fell to rest on her smooth ebony thigh once again, an arrow was already nocked on the string of the black bow.

Kai watched all of that happen in silence. Sunny was blinded by the smoke, but could sense the shadows — the charming archer, however, could see everything transpire just fine.

He sighed.

"Never mind."

Sunny smiled.

"What, did you expect me to give her a ride? Thanks, but no thanks. The last time she mounted me... was too memorable."

He paused for a moment, and then added in a glum tone:

"I mean, she cut off my wings, strangled me, and almost drove a knife into my skull."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"She did?"

When Sunny nodded, he gave him a reproachful look.

"You know… something like that would have been good to know before I carried her across the sea of clouds on my back."

Sunny grinned.

"It did cross my mind to give you a warning. But I was sure that she would not try to kill you… well, mostly sure. Reasonably sure? I was somewhat sure that she would not try to kill you."

With that, he jumped into the chasm, spread his wings, and allowed the currents of heated air to carry him across the abyssal moat of the Ash Castle. Kai followed a few moments later with a quiet sigh.

If there had been something dangerous waiting for them inside, Slayer would have already turned it into a pincushion with her arrows. So, the two of them landed calmly on the cracked floor of the castle's vast courtyard, then walked toward the crumbling keep.

Slayer allowed her bow to turn into a slender chain vambrace, then climbed down the tower with lethal grace. She seemed to plummet from one support to another, wedging her short swords between the weathered stones when there was none to find purchase on — in just a few short seconds, she reached the ground and joined them.

When they entered the keep, Sunny looked around with a surprised expression.

"Huh."

What looked like a castle from the outside… was actually merely a crude model of one. There was nothing inside, really — no floors, no chambers, no complicated maze of corridors and stairwells. Instead, there was simply a vast empty space, the floor covered in ash that piled like mountains in the corners.

It seemed that even Ariel's attention to detail had a limit.

'Well, it makes sense.'

After all, the Ash Tyrants that had populated this castle once would not have been humans. Their size would have varied greatly, too — the towering gate of the keep hinted that some of them were truly enormous.

"Do you see anything under the ash?"

Sunny did not know what he wanted to find, exactly, but he had hoped to discover some clues about Ariel, his game, and the Jade Queen.

Kai shook his head slowly.

"It's all in ruins. But there is some kind of pedestal in the center."

They glanced at each other, then made their way to the heart of the empty keep.

There, the floor of the castle opened into a great circular pit. Smoke rose through the opening like a rugged pillar, escaping through a similar one in the roof of the Ash Castle.

And just in front of the pit, there was a charred stone pedestal that resembled an altar, its surface covered in ash.

Walking closer, Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then brushed the ash away. His hand felt two small shapes hidden beneath it — clearing more of the ash, Sunny picked one of them up and studied it impassively.

There, in his palm, lay a bestial figurine cut from flawless white jade.

It was the figure of a Snow Beast.

'Two of them…'

Twelve of the fourteen Snow figures remained on the board, which meant that the player of the Ash Domain had managed to slay two — two Beasts.

And here, two Snow Beast figurines were resting on an altar.

That… could not have been a coincidence.

"Why do you think these figures are here?"

Kai's question made Sunny frown.

He remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I'm not entirely sure."

Then, he suddenly remembered something… the ancient bones resting in the depths of the Ravenheart volcano.

Following an impulse, Sunny shifted his weight a little and tossed the figure of the Snow Beast into the pit.

It disappeared into the smoke without a trace.

A dozen seconds passed in silence, and then…

Sunny was suddenly somewhere else.

Chapter-2321: Truth or Death

The world was coming to an end.

On an endless white plain, the corpses of lesser gods lay broken and shattered. Rivers of ichor were flowing across the fractured ice like molten gold, cascading into the depths of an imprisoned ocean. High above, the sky was broken as well. Tendrils of nothingness were seeping through the fissures, slowly consuming the vast expanse of the firmament.

A giant was kneeling in the middle of the silent battlefield, grasping his head with two enormous hands. Golden blood and viscous streams of grey matter were flowing through his fingers, and his radiant eyes were darting around, feverish and dazed.

His beautiful ivory armor was torn, and his spear lay on the ice, forgotten, still brimming with the echoes of annihilating lightning.

The giant was a deity, his spirit as vast as a world.

His lips moved, whispering:

"I… I am… I am, I am… I am…"

His whispers were full of dread.

Then, he suddenly grew still and looked down, at the empty vastness of the broken ice in front of him.

The giant's expression slowly grew eerily calm, and his voice grew even, sounding deeper and lower than it had before.

He lowered his hands, allowing his broken skull to come undone, and spoke:

"Hail Weaver… Firstborn of the Forgotten God."

As he did, a nebulous figure was suddenly revealed on the ice, shrouded by a tattered mantle and wearing a fearsome mask. A voice that was like a thousand hopeless prayers resounded from behind the mask, making the giant shiver.

"Brother, my brother. Why are you hiding inside this hideous corpse?"

The giant laughed with a voice that was not his own, then spoke in an insidious whisper:

"Ah… must you offend me so, Weaver? Must you abandon all fear when facing the Demon of Dread? All of us daemons have sworn to destroy you. Why are you here? Why have you revealed yourself?"

The fearsome mask of the nebulous daemon stayed still.

Weaver remained silent for a while, then spoke:

"My brother knows what everyone fears, and therefore, he knows everyone's truth. However, I know no fear. What then is my truth?"

The wind moved the tattered mantle, revealing nothing of what was hidden beneath.

"I thought I'd offer you to play a game."

The dying giant gazed upon Weaver, light dimming slowly in his golden eyes.

"A game? Ah… what kind of game?"

The Demon of Fate answered to the dying deity:

"A game of death, of course. Whoever wins will be owed a truth. And if I lose... I will allow myself to be destroyed."

The giant shuddered and collapsed, and as he did, the broken ice swallowed his corpse.

A faint whisper drifted above the dreadful battlefield:

"Come… I accept…"

The world suddenly disappeared into nothingness, replaced by a familiar room.

A masked figure was sitting on the cushions in front of an exquisite jade board. The room was drowning in darkness, and from that darkness, a whisper came:

"I know what truth I long for. But what truth can you, who sees the depths of fate, be lacking? What is it that you wish to learn, Weaver?"

The fearsome mask of the Demon of Fate looked at the darkness. A thousand intertwined voices resounded from below it, making the darkness tremble.

"Do you know how fate can be broken, brother?"

A porcelain hand rose from the depths of the tattered mantle and grasped the figure of a figure carved from white jade.

"...That is the truth that I seek."

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Sunny let out a groan and collapsed to his knees.

'Ah…'

The echo of the insidious whisper and the aftershock of the nebulous voice were still ringing in his ears. He shuddered, feeling a terrible pressure crushing his mind.

"Sunny?"

Kai was startled, rushing to support him.

Sunny waved him away.

"I am… I am fine."

He was, indeed, fine — if a little worse to wear.

"What happened?"

Sunny slowly picked himself off the floor and looked at the remaining jade figure on the altar.

"...Hell if I know."

His voice sounded subdued.

One moment, he was standing in the keep of the Ash Castle, and the next moment, he was in the middle of a harrowing battlefield, the world coming undone around him, witnessing two daemons having a strange conversation.

Weaver and Ariel… Fate and Dread.

The master of lies and the keeper of truths.

Weaver's nebulous figure seemed to be… a bit ragged, for a lofty Divinity. The conversation must have taken place during the Doom War, when the sinister daemon was being hunted both by their siblings and by the gods. That porcelain hand looked familiar, as well… it must have been the one Weaver had assembled from the parts of the broken mannequins in the Ebony Tower.

Ariel, meanwhile, seemed to have been possessing the body of a defeated Divine champion — the giant who wielded a spear infused with ferocious endlessness of golden lightning. Sunny had not seen what the Demon of Dread actually looked like until the very end… maybe Ariel did not look like anything, at all.

Maybe the Demon of Dread existed only as a whisper.

In any case, Weaver had offered to play a game with high stakes, and Ariel accepted.

"I think… I just saw a vision. Of sorts."

What Sunny had seen… did not feel like a vision. Actually, it did not feel like anything he was familiar with. It was as if he was there, but not there. As if he was present, but also absent.

As if he had simply learned the truth of what had happened on that day.

Sunny winced, feeling the pressure of witnessing three gods — two daemons and a dying Divine human — subside slowly, allowing him to breathe freely once more.

'Who was that giant?'

Kai, meanwhile, raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… are you prone to receiving visions, Sunny?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. Rather, it seems like throwing the figure of the Snow Beast into the volcano triggered it."

He hesitated for a while.

"In any case, I think I was wrong."

Kai frowned.

"About what?"

Looking around, Sunny remembered the jade board… and the desperate position of the Ash Domain. The Ash was losing desperately.

He inhaled deeply.

"I… don't think that the Jade Queen played Ash."

Sunny glanced at the figure of the Snow Beast once more and said, his voice subdued:

"I think the Demon of Dread played Ash. As for Snow… it must have been played by Weaver."

Chapter-2322: Beast Sacrifice

Sunny considered the strange vision he had received for a while. Eventually, his eyes gleamed darkly.

'They were playing for truths.'

Ariel had been a collector of truth, but one mystery he could never solve was Weaver. Weaver, meanwhile… seemed to have been interested in finding a way to change fate.

That truth alone was priceless. Sunny had suspected that the Demon of Fate had a complicated relationship with their own… source element? Domain? Aspect? In any case, the Nightmare Spell seemed to have been designed with the explicit purpose of training its carriers to defy and twist fate.

Sunny firmly believed that the appraisal the Spell gave to those who conquered Nightmares was connected to how much they strayed from the original flow of fate, at least.

But having a strong suspicion and hearing it with his own two ears were two different things.

Granted… Sunny only learned that Weaver was searching for a way to change fate, not why. He did not know what the Demon of Fate had discovered, either.

In any case, the two daemons had played Death Game — the winner was supposed to be rewarded with a truth.

And Weaver had utterly crushed Ariel, in the end.

'Rewarded, huh?'

Was that what had happened to him? He had sacrificed the figure of

a slain figure… and received a truth as a reward?

But why that truth, in particular?

Sunny stared at the remaining Snow Beast figure, then at the pit opening into the main vent of the volcano.

'Wait...'

Was it simply because he wondered who the players of this game had been?

'My head was full of questions, though. Why this one in particular?'

Was the answer given at random, or did the strength of a sacrificed figure play a role?

Would he learn something far more important if he sacrificed a Snow Monster figure? A Demon, A Devil…

A Tyrant?

Suddenly, Sunny was very glad that there were twelve whole Snow Abominations left on the board.

He had so many questions.

Sunny had spent a decade slowly learning the secrets of the world. By now, he knew more about the truth of existence than almost anyone… but he still desperately wanted — needed — to know more.

Why had the Doom War started? How did it end? How did the gods die? How did daemons perish? Was the Forgotten God still imprisoned in the Void? Where had the Nightmares and the Dream Realm come from?

What had been Weaver's goal? Why was the Nightmare Spell created? To what end?

And many less grandiose questions, as well…

For example, what did he need to do to kill Eurys? What lay at the

heart of Shadow Realm? When had the Demon of Oblivion died? How could she have been dead before Nether and his siblings rebelled against the gods?

"I think…"

A strange smile slowly bloomed on Sunny's face.

"I think that coming here may have been the best idea of my life, Kai."

Twelve Snow Abominations, and the Snow Beast figure in front of him…

Sunny had just discovered a way to pry thirteen truths from Ariel's Game.

Kai gave him a strange look.

"Sunny, can you please snap out of it? You're scaring, uh… your elegant Shadow over there. Yeah."

Sunny blinked a couple of times and glanced at Slayer.

Slayer seemed perfectly at ease. Kai, however, looked a little nervous. Sunny chuckled.

"Alright, alright. It's just that I discovered a use for the figures of slain Snow Abominations. I'm a little excited."

What answer would he receive next?

Sunny reached for the remaining Snow figure, but then halted.

His expression turned guarded.

'Am I… letting my curiosity trump caution?'

They had just recently talked about how some truths were too dangerous to learn. Sunny did not need to think too much to remember a chilling example… they were the runes containing the knowledge of the Void that Ariel had left behind in the Estuary of the

Great River.

The closer one's soul was to being Divine, the more resistant it was to the corrupting influence of the Void. That was why Awakening could destroy the Seed of Nightmare blooming in an Aspirant's soul… that was also why Sunny could endure knowing more about the Void as a Supreme as he could as a Master or a Saint.

But that did not mean that he could endure much of such knowledge… not at all.

And he definitely could not endure what Weaver and Ariel could. Even they had not been entirely immune to Corruption, so what hope did Sunny have?

If Ariel's Game granted him a truth that he could not endure, what was he going to do?

Sunny hesitated for a while.

'Wait. Isn't it wonderful, though?'

This incarnation of his was currently separated from the other six. Their minds and memories would fuse once again after Sunny escaped Ariel's Game… but not before it.

So even if his mind was infected by Corruption as a result of learning something he was not supposed to know, he could simply kill himself. That way, his other incarnations would never come in contact with the forbidden knowledge.

Kai frowned a little.

"What… are you thinking about?"

Sunny shrugged absent-mindedly.

"Killing myself…"

Kai was suddenly standing very near, looking at him intensely.

"No... you mustn't!"

Sunny looked at him in confusion.

"Huh?"

Kai grabbed his shoulders, a rattled expression on his face.

"You… we don't know each other that well, and I won't presume to know what scars lay hidden in your heart… but you must not, Sunny! In this world we live in, a human life can be lost in an instant. But that only makes it more precious — just like your life is precious, too…"

Sunny scowled.

"What are you on about, fool?"

Then, realizing how his words must have sounded to Kai, who could feel their sincerity, he winced.

"Oh, you misunderstood. I wasn't really thinking about killing myself… just this version of myself, should the need arise. It's not that big of an issue. Plus, this wouldn't even be the first or second time I killed myself. As you can see, I'm still perfectly alive!"

Kai stared at him silently for a while, then slowly let go of his shoulders, turned away, and coughed a couple of times.

"Oh. Oh... I see. Never mind, then."

Then, his expression turned cold and wary, full of somber apprehension.

Sunny sighed.

'This guy… such a handful, really!'

"Listen, why would I kill myself? I am filthy rich, drop-dead gorgeous, have an awesome castle, and my girlfriend is literally the most beautiful woman in the world. Who would want to die and leave all that behind?"

Kai looked at him and shook his head.

"No, it's not that. I just looked beyond the castle."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"And?"

A dark expression appeared on Kai's face.

"Do you remember saying that we'll have to wait for the enemy to make the first move? Well…"

He sighed.

"I think they're making the move now…"

Chapter-2323: Golden Dawn

A second later, Sunny was standing on the edge of the volcano's vast caldera. He had stepped through the shadows while pulling Slayer and Kai with him — Slayer remained impassive, long used to such treatment, while Kai seemed a little startled.

Sunny remained silent for a moment.

"Come to think of it… that castle is a really terrible fortress, isn't it?"

The Ash Castle stood above the main vent of the volcano, at the very heart of the caldera — which meant that its walls and towers were lower than the surrounding slopes. One could not see the snowy peaks even from the roof of donjon, while the enemy would be above the castle as soon as they scaled the volcano and reached the caldera.

It was a truly terribly designed defensive fortification…

"With respect… I don't think now is the proper time to ponder the merits and flaws of an old castle's design."

Kai's voice sounded tense. Sunny looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean? We are about to be attacked, so when would there be a better time?"

Smiling faintly, he turned to face the three snowy peaks towering in the distance.

The moon had fallen beyond the horizon, and the sun was rising. Now that Sunny knew where east was, he could determine where the rest of the cardinal directions were, as well. The Ash Castle stood on the southern edge of the game board, while the three lonesome mountains — and the Snow Castle as well — were in the north.

Dawn had painted the sea of clouds below in soft shades of mauve and lilac. The world was darker above the volcanoes, where clouds of smoke and ash obscured the sky, but in the north…

Sunny frowned.

Hurricane winds were blowing above the distant mountains, and a vast snowstorm was rolling from the north, its billowing wall slowly devouring the world. A few moments later, it crashed into the three peaks, sending great plumes of snow into the air.

Infused with a dreamy radiance by the golden dawn, the plumes of snow extended south, carried by the wind like streaming tendrils.

"There is something strange about the wind."

Sunny glanced at Kai.

"How do you mean?"

The charming archer hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure how to describe it. Awakened archers always pay attention to the wind — the speed and direction of the wind matter a lot when making long-distance shots, after all, so it becomes an instinct. And my instinct is telling me that there is something wrong with the wind."

He hesitated for a few moments, and then added with a sigh:

"Actually, we tend to rely on instinct a lot. Many things affect the flight of an arrow — altitude, temperature, humidity, even the Coriolis effect… anything that has to do with ballistics. Naturally, none of them behave reasonably in the Dream Realm, so there is no other choice than to develop an instinctual sense of all those things. If you want to hit a target from a great distance, that is."

Sunny scratched the tip of his nose.

"Really? Huh… I just sort of toss things with as much force as I can, and hope for the best. Well, I don't rely on sight to aim, so I guess my situation is a bit different."

Then, he glanced at Slayer and smiled.

"What about you? Are you a walking encyclopedia of ballistics, as well?"

Instead of answering, his Shadow pointed to the tendrils of snow extending from the lonesome mountains.

At that moment, the first snowflakes had reached the slopes of the fuming volcano. Then something strange happened…

The snowstorm swallowed three mountains, and at the same time, the tendrils of snow glistened, seemingly absorbing the golden light of dawn. A ripple spread through the sea of clouds below, and the snow seemed to solidify, turning into glass.

Soon, unimaginable, ethereal bridges of frozen glass arched above the vibrant sea of golden-pink clouds, spanning dozens of kilometers as they glistened with dreamy light. It was a beautiful and fantastical view…

What mattered the most to Sunny, though, was that the crystal bridges were connecting the snowy mountains to the volcanoes.

'Are they making a move?'

He scrunched his face slightly, then glanced at Kai and Slayer.

"I think you guys should prepare to shoot."

He could barely see the distant mountains behind the billowing veil of snow that swallowed them. However, he could feel it…

A heavy and oppressive feeling that permeated the air, screaming of a looming threat.

Kai shivered, prompting Sunny to ask:

"What do you see?"

The charming archer hesitated for a few moments, then spoke quietly:

"On the eastern mountain… the clockwork giant is coming to life. Ice is falling from his joints, and he is reaching for an enormous sword that was thrust into the snow. On the western mountain, the colossal worm is slowly unfurling its long body. It's slithering through a tunnel — its head is, at least. That thing is even more enormous than I thought."

His gaze shifted a little.

"And on the mountain right in front of us, the hive of the crystalline insects is in a frenzy. They have already awakened from their slumber and are rushing outside, clearing the entrances of the ice caves from the snow and ice that had blocked them. There are… many more of them than it seemed."

Sunny frowned.

Each of the mountains was connected to one of the volcanoes. So, it was reasonable to assume that the clockwork giant would conquer the eastern volcano, the snow worm would conquer the western volcano…

While the crystalline hive would attack the Ash Castle.

He had expected the Snow Abominations to either go for the empty squares or attack the castle together. But it seemed that they were going to act independently, going for both targets.

'So, what does it say to me?'

He had no idea.

What Sunny did know at the moment was that a swarm of Great Beasts would soon descend upon him and his companions.

He gave Kai a long look, then outstretched a hand…

Nothing happened.

'...Damn it.'

Sunny had wanted to summon the Shadow Chair, but alas, he had no

access to his Memories.

So, instead, he brushed the ash from a nearby boulder, sat down, and gestured at the ethereal glass bridge.

Noticing a confused expression on Kai's face, Sunny smiled.

"They're all yours!"

Chapter-2324: Enemy Move

Sunny wanted to see how Kai would fare in a battle against Great abominations. The crystalline insects seemed like good practice… of course, there was a possibility that the entire hive consisted of Cursed Ones, instead.

But if that was true, the three of them were already dead. There was nothing much to do.

Kai stared at Sunny with a stunned expression.

"You're… really not going to do anything?"

Sunny smiled pleasantly.

"How can you say that, buddy? I'll do plenty, of course… enjoy the view, relax, appreciate the weather. Oh, I'll craft new arrows while you waste the ones I already made, too. So make every shot count."

Kai kept looking at him for a few more moments, then turned to look at Slayer.

He did not say anything, but his expression was quite telling.

It was as if Kai wanted to ask…

"That's what you're dealing with on a daily basis?"

Slayer spared him a short glance and shrugged. Sunny, meanwhile, leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Let me tell you, Saint Nightingale… my previous disciple set quite a high bar. Ah, she was such a joy to train. What other teacher can boast that their student earned a True Name before even becoming an Aspirant? So, no pressure... but please don't disappoint me. I have high standards because of her!"

Kai sighed and nocked an arrow on the string of his bow.

"She is my student, as well."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Huh?"

Kai smiled faintly.

"A girl who earned a True Name before becoming an Aspirant… you mean Rain, right? The only person in the world who Awakened without the Nightmare Spell. I was her archery tutor for a short while back in NQSC, many years ago. I think Effie introduced us. Small world, huh?"

Sunny cleared his throat.

'Right...'

"Oh… I see. I think she mentioned knowing you."

'I was the one who convinced you to give her lessons, fool!'

Of course, Kai did not remember that.

He took a deep breath, raised his bow, and slowly drew it.

Then, he spoke evenly:

"Strike true."

His clear voice was not loud, but it somehow managed to drown out the howling wind. The stalwart authority contained within it moved the world, making the world listen. Sunny sensed a faint flow of essence, and the arrow he had crafted suddenly seemed much more than it had been before.

'Hmm…'

As Kai allowed the string to escape his relaxed fingers and sent the arrow flying, Sunny remembered his battle against the Dread Lord.

'Actually, I might have been wrong.'

Kai seemed to be plagued by doubt, which did not lend itself well to being a Sovereign. But, on the other hand, the very nature of his Aspect forced him to constantly practice exerting his authority… in a way.

A Supreme like Sunny could bend the world to his will. But Kai did not have to… the world simply listened to him, following his commands voluntarily. Was that preparing him for Supremacy, or was it a detriment instead?

Sunny was not sure, and he had no time to ponder this issue at the moment, either.

What he was sure of, though, was that a giant tentacle would not rise from below the clouds to destroy Kai's arrow — not this time. His certainty was based on the fact that when the tendrils of snow turned into crystal bridges, he was suddenly able to extend his shadow sense forward, to the lonesome peak that was now hiding in the embrace of a snowstorm.

Sunny could sense the entire ice hive, now.

And what he sensed did not make him happy.

'Oh, they are Great Beasts, all right.'

There were about a hundred of them.

Each was the size of a bull, with a small thorax and a large abdomen. Their legs were thin and delicate, but terrifyingly powerful. The bodies of the insect-like abominations seemed like they were made out of glass, and looked deceptively fragile. They were strangely breathtaking…

Sunny knew that they would glisten beautifully in the sunlight. He also knew that once they drew closer, he would see gnawed bones in their transparent bellies… maybe even a human skull or two.

Gods only knew what these abominations looked like soon after feasting on the flesh of their enemies. The sight of the bloody paste

sloshing inside their crystal stomachs had to be indescribably gruesome… and Sunny hoped to never learn what nectar these creatures produced, and what kind of hives they built when not trapped in a desolate realm made by a daemon.

Had it been Ariel who turned the crystalline insects into a figure, or Weaver?

Whoever it was, they had done a great favor for the world by imprisoning these abominations here.

Kai's arrow was still flying when Slayer raised her bow. Sunny saw lean muscles roll under her ebony skin, drawing taut like steel cables, as she pulled the string. Her graceful figure was like a work of art sculpted from smooth obsidian, with every little detail carved with obsessive care.

A moment later, she released the string, and a powerful gust sent her long braid fluttering in the wind.

Sunny shivered, feeling a cold killing intent wash over him.

Reaching into the shadows, he went about crafting another arrow.

"Did you feel that?"

Kai answered without looking at him:

"Feel what?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"How utterly focused on one thing and one thing only our killer beauty is… on killing whoever it is that her arrow is aimed at."

Kai frowned.

In the next moment, his arrow struck the target. It was an amazing shot, really — very few people would be able to hit a moving target from dozens of kilometers away, despite the raging wind.

However, it was all for naught.

Because Kai's arrow simply bounced off the crystalline insect's beautiful carapace.

His expression dimmed.

Then, suddenly…

Slayer's arrow struck the exact same abomination, piercing its gemlike compound eye and making its head explode into a million glistening shards.

Sunny pursed his lips and looked at his Shadow with reproach.

"Listen… with you aiming for the eye, it is hard for me to illustrate the point. Couldn't you have pierced its carapace, instead?"

Slayer gave him a cold, murderous look.

Her inky-black eyes were quite expressive, saying…

"How about I pierce your carapace, instead?"

Sunny coughed.

"Fine, fine…"

He outstretched a hand, but then remembered that he could not summon the Endless Spring either.

Sunny sighed.

"What are you guys waiting for? Keep shooting. There's a hundred hungry Great Beasts out there, you know. They'll be here in less than a minute… how many do you think you can kill before then?"

No matter how many it was... he knew that it would not be enough.

Chapter-2325: Crystal Hive

Although Sunny insinuated that he was not going to join the battle, in truth, he knew that he would have to. His carefree demeanor was nothing but a facade.

The situation… was quite bleak.

In the west, the colossal worm had finally emerged from the billowing wall of snow. Its massive head reached the ethereal glass bridge, and as its pale body rippled, the Cursed Beast swiftly crawled across the abyss of gilded clouds. The clouds were painted in vibrant shades of gold and magenta, while the gossamer bridge glistened in the sunlight…

The sight of it was as beautiful as the Snow Worm was grotesque.

Its massive body extended and extended from the snowstorm, already spanning several kilometers in length. And yet, Sunny still could not see its tail… in fact, he had a strange feeling that he might not see it at all, as if the Cursed One's body defied the concept of finality.

As if the length of the ghastly abomination was simply infinite, becoming as great as it needed to be.

A Beast like that… could probably devour the roots of an entire realm.

And yet, Sunny felt far more pressured by the clockwork giant marching across the fantastical bridge of glasslike snow in the east. Now that the creature had drawn closer, he could discern a few details of its appearance…

The giant did, indeed, look somewhat similar to the toy knights they had seen in the Jade Palace. However, that similarity was shallow.

The abomination was clearly a construct, its massive body assembled from wood, brass, and weathered hide, shaped to resemble a mighty warrior wearing a suit of heavy armor. Thousands of scars marred its surface, as if the giant had survived a myriad of dreadful battles… as if it had survived every war that had ever been waged, felling countless enemies with its sword.

The giant did not resemble a toy at all… if anything, it resembled a training dummy that had served some warmongering deity before coming alive and subsequently succumbing to Corruption.

Maybe it had.

The giant was marching across the bridge with measured, heavy steps, and even from a great distance, Sunny felt pressured by the unhurried inevitability of its approach.

Luckily, the two Cursed Ones were heading for the two volcanoes that Kai and Slayer had abandoned.

The abominable Ice Hive, however… was heading directly for the Ash Castle.

By now, the first of the crystalline abominations were already emerging from the vast network of caves they had perforated the mountain with. Their transparent bodies seemed to ignite under the sun, shining with reflected light. The first few were already on the glass bridge — they stopped, shook the snow and ice of their crystal carapaces… and then leaped into the air.

Translucent wings unfurled behind them, glowing like golden panes of stained glass.

'...Great. So they can fly, too.'

Behind a veneer of nonchalance, Sunny felt somber. He continued to craft arrows while observing the enemy through the shadows.

As soon as the first of them rose into the air, its wing shattered, broken by Kai's arrow. The abomination plummeted down, doomed to disappear into the sea of clouds — before it could, however, two of its kin swooped in, tearing the struggling beast apart and devouring

its crystalline flesh.

Sunny frowned.

'Not fast enough.'

Kai and Slayer were like a two-man… well, one man and one shadow lady… artillery battery. The amount of devastation two Transcendent archers could unleash was truly terrifying — with each shot, hurricane winds rose and ravaged the slopes of the towering volcano, making the ground shake. Roaring thunderclaps tore apart the silence, making Sunny's ears ring.

And they were swift, too… when he imagined what the two of them could have done to the great alloy ramparts of Falcon Scott, he felt a chill run down his spine.

Slayer swiftly killed several abominations, piercing their crystalline bodies without discrimination. Kai, however, had learned his lesson and tried to aim for more vulnerable spots, like the wings or the eyes.

He managed to send a few insect-like Beasts plummeting into the clouds, as well — two of them were torn apart by their siblings, while the third landed on the ethereal bridge and scurried across its surface, only to die half a dozen seconds later when Slayer's arrow pinned it to the glistening glass.

Thinking back to the battle against Asuras of Condemnation, Sunny was surprised by how efficient the two archers were in slaying Great Beasts.

And yet, their startling lethality was nowhere near enough to prevent the Ice Hive from reaching the volcano, let alone annihilate it. At best, they would dispose of a couple dozen of the eerily beautiful crystalline abominations before being forced to engage them in melee.

And once the swarm of Great Beasts descended upon them, they would be overwhelmed in a matter of seconds.

Sunny had to prevent that from happening…

However, even Sunny himself was not sure that he could contend against scores of Great Beasts.

Maybe if he had his shadows with him and could augment his body, he would have stood a better chance. Alone as he was, however, Sunny was only marginally stronger than each individual crystal abomination. He had some advantages thanks to his Aspect, of course, but while it was enough to face a dozen or two Great Beasts, fighting the entire hive could easily get him killed.

'Fighting against overwhelming odds, a hair's breadth away from death… ah, how nostalgic…'

Sunny's expression crumpled.

He would rather not revisit this particular part of his tumultuous past...

There had to be some trick, some strategy he could come up with.

There was about half a minute left before the dwellers of the Ice Hive reached the volcano. Great Beasts could move with startling speed, but Kai and Slayer were aiming for the fastest ones first — so, the abominations were slower to reach their target than they would have been otherwise.

'I have thirty seconds to come up with a plan.'

Sunny started to craft another arrow… then rushed forward, grabbed Slayer, and pulled her into the shadows.

"Kai, dodge!"

Kai was already in the air by the time Sunny finished the sentence.

In the next moment, the slope of the volcano exploded, drowning in vicious white radiance and incinerating heat.

Chapter-2326: Attack and Defense

Sunny was tossed out of the shadows and rolled across the melting rock, still holding Slayer in his embrace. A moment later, he pushed himself off the ground and carried both of them dozens of meters away, to safety.

Kai was in the air, embers burning in his auburn hair. The bronze elements of his ivory armor had turned incandescent on the left side, and wisps of smoke were rising from beneath his pauldron.

There was a long scar left on the slope of the volcano. The layer of ash had been burned away, and the rock beneath had turned to lava, flowing down like a red river.

'Hell…'

Sunny came to his senses when Slayer's elbow connected with his ribs, pushing him away. A moment later, she was already drawing her bow without sparing him a look.

Kai was doing the same in the air, using only the strength of his core to pull the string.

Far away, the crystalline swarm was swiftly devouring the distance between the snowy peak and the volcano. The insect-like abominations had assembled into a strange formation in the sky, their translucent wings almost touching each other.

These wings... were like lenses, focusing the light of the rising sun into a beam of pure white destruction. Each individual beast might not have been too dangerous, but when scores of them worked together…

The defenders of the Ash Castle could very easily be turned to ash themselves.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, appalled. It seemed like the crystalline abominations were not as simple as they looked.

'...Fifteen seconds, maybe.'

Cursing under his breath, he called out:

"Kai, are you alright?"

The archer answered from above, his voice sober:

"Yes. I am not easily burned."

It seemed that his words were both an answer and a command — as soon as he finished speaking, the fiery embers shining in his hair were extinguished, and the smoke rising from beneath his armor was blown away by the wind.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Keep dodging, then!"

Another beam of incinerating light illuminated the slopes of the volcano, but this time, all three of them dodged out of the way in time. None of them were burned… however, Slayer and Kai had to slow down their barrage for a brief moment.

Sunny frowned.

'Are we actually going to die here?'

Even if they had more time, Kai was running out of arrows. Slayer, meanwhile, was recalling hers — but each one took some time to return.

After all, these arrows were not Memories. Unlike Saint, Slayer could not summon and dismiss Memories, so her armaments were merely enchanted in ingenious ways to resemble them. Her bow could turn into a slender chain and wrap itself around her arm like a vambrace,

while her quiver was enchanted to summon arrows back through a special spatial storage.

Actually, quite a fascinating piece of sorcery went into marking the arrows and connecting them to the hidden dimensional layer of the quiver, as well as into making sure that they could be summoned back from a distance…

But Sunny had no time to admire his own handiwork at the moment.

He hesitated for a split second, then looked into the shadows.

What Sunny wanted to do was reach his hand into them and retrieve the corpse of the first Great Beast that Slayer had killed, which was still laying on the slope of the distant mountain.

However, as he moved slightly to do just that, he suddenly was overwhelmed by a cold, chilling sensation. It was as if something vast and terrifying was looking back at him from the shadows, warning him to stay back.

'What… is going on?'

Sunny was startled. This was the first time he had felt something like that… the dark expanse of shadow was supposed to be his home, so encountering something far deadlier than him there was an unwelcome novelty.

It almost felt as if a titanic tentacle would rise from the darkness to grasp him if he dared to step foot or even lay a finger on the snowy mountain.

'Are we… prohibited from attacking the enemy peak?'

Why would the being hiding beneath the clouds allow their arrows to land, but forbid them from moving across the sea of clouds personally?

Sunny shifted his reasoning, forcing himself to think about what was happening as a game.

The Snow Domain was attacking, so the Ash Domain… was

defending?

That made an odd kind of sense.

Shooting at the attackers was considered an act of defense, but moving to the snowy peak seemed to be against the rules.

'What happened to offense being the best defense, though?'

Sunny's gaze turned darker.

While he was considering what to do next, Kai and Slayer had managed to slay a dozen more abominations. The crystalline beasts were quite near, by now — enough so that Sunny could actually see shattered crystals and ancient bones resting inside their transparent bellies.

If there was one good piece of news, it was that the insect-like abominations had dove under the clouds of ash, by now. The rising sun was obscured by the dark clouds, so there were no annihilating beams of focused sunlight blasting the slope of the volcano anymore.

Still, time was short.

Sunny inhaled deeply, preparing himself for the battle.

"Hey, Kai! Remember how I said that our castle was absolutely horrible?"

Kai landed on the ground near him, sliding on the ash and nocking another arrow on the string.

"Sure! Why?"

Sunny looked at the approaching swarm of Great Beasts and smiled.

"I changed my mind! Let's retreat into the castle, right now!"

Kai sent his arrow flying, glanced at him briefly, then shot toward the Ash Castle without saying another word.

Slayer followed, rushing into the caldera with stunning speed.

For a few moments, Sunny was left alone on the pinnacle of the fuming volcano, looking at the swarm of Snow Beasts coldly.

"Weaver, you bastard…"

Had Weaver known that someone would come to retrieve a part of their Legacy from Ariel's Game, one day?

They had to — otherwise, it wouldn't have been hidden here in the first place.

So why the hell couldn't that damned daemon make retrieving their Legacy a little easier?!

Cursing the Demon of Fate, Sunny called upon the shadows. In the next moment, hundreds of long spikes grew from the slope of the volcano, each ending in a terribly sharp tip.

And then, all of them shot into the dark sky, rising to meet the descending swarm like a welcoming salvo.

Using the barrage of shadows as a cover, Sunny retreated toward the Ash Castle.

Chapter-2327: Proper Siege

By the time Sunny reached the main keep of the crumbling fortress, Kai and Slayer were already there. The vast interior of the castle was just as they had left it — vast, dark, and filled with nothing but smoke and ash.

"What's the plan?"

Kai tried to sound calm, but there was a hint of tension in his voice.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"Now… might be a good time to start praying."

The gods were dead, though, so there was really no point.

He flashed the charming archer a grin.

"Hey, don't be too worried! This is not even one of the top ten worst situations I've been in."

Kai forced out a pale smile.

"O—oh… that's a relief, then. Just out of curiosity, though… what might one of the top ten worst situations you've been in look like?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well… this one time, I met a particularly loathsome bird. That one was pretty gruesome. Did I mention that I hate birds, by the way?"

Crow Crow would have been quite offended to hear him saying that, but luckily, the peculiar Echo was not here right now.

Sunny turned to the gates of the keep.

"In any way, the plan is simple."

Answering his call, the shadows surged and rose. A moment later, all three entrances to the hollow interior of the Ash Castle — the gate and the circular openings in its floor and roof — were blocked by impenetrable walls of solidified shadows.

Despite the questionable design of the ancient castle, it still offered a vital advantage to its defenders — there were only so many ways the enemy could get inside. Sunny doubted that the Great Beasts would be able to bring the walls of the keep down, which meant that he could syphon them into a narrow passage or two.

That was not exactly a trump card, but it was definitely better than fighting a hive of flying abominations in the open.

"My shadows will slow those bees… those ants? They will slow those bugs down, but not stop them. Once the vermin start to break through, I will engage them in melee, while you two will support me from the back. If more than one entrance is breached, we will each concentrate on one."

Now that all entrances to the keep were barricaded, it was completely dark inside. Luckily, none of the defenders required light to see — Kai due to his Awakened Ability, Sunny and Slayer due to being shadows.

Kai counted the arrows in his quiver and frowned.

"I must say, as far as plans go…"

He did not get to finish, however, because at that moment, something crashed into the roof of the keep.

Then, something scraped against the ancient stone.

And then, more and more scraping sounds surrounded them, echoing in the darkness.

Kai's face paled as he looked up, his gaze penetrating the walls of the ancient fortress.

Sunny could sense what was happening outside, as well. His expression dimmed.

The muffled impacts and the chilling scraping fused into a strange litany, and then, the castle trembled again as a deafening thunderclap made him wince.

The crystalline abominations had landed on the walls and the roof of the keep, and were now ramming their bodies into the wall of shadows barring its main entrance.

The first crack appeared on the surface of the manifested shadow.

"Hold!"

As Kai commanded the dark barricade to stay intact, the second impact failed to produce a new crack.

The third, however, did not.

Sunny frowned.

'What to do, what to do…'

It used to be that he always lacked the means to deal with the endless tribulations facing him, searching for solutions desperately. Now that Sunny was a Supreme Titan, however, there were almost too many tools at his disposal.

His versatility was nothing short of singular, so it was not so much a question of finding a solution as a question of choosing the best solution out of many that were available to him.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny split his mind into three streams.

"Prepare yourselves."

One stream focused on repairing the crumbling barricades, as well as manifesting shadows outside the castle — as the Great Beasts attacked it, sharp spikes protruded from its walls, impaling them. Black hands rose from the ash to break their limbs, and heavy chains wrapped themselves around their bodies, pulling them onto the

spikes.

Sadly, the Great Beasts were both too powerful and too cunning to be severely harmed by the manifested shadows. A few of them had been killed or wounded in the initial barrage and now, but they swiftly wisened up and began evading the shadows — only to destroy them a moment later.

The crystalline insects were astonishingly nimble, both in the air and on the ground, so they fared well against the shadows. Still, they were forced to concentrate on destroying the barricades, which allowed Sunny to focus his countermeasures only on those spots and thus increase his efficiency.

It was a proper siege… one where the besieging army consisted of enormous glasslike insects, while the defending army consisted of one man controlling the shadows cast by the castle, but a proper one nevertheless.

The second mind stream was reserved for controlling Sunny's own body in the inevitable melee.

While the third…

The third partition of his mind was responsible for analyzing the situation and looking for the best solution to it. Sunny felt like he was missing something, and this feeling of making a mistake was driving him mad.

"Above."

A violent impact shook the castle, and the seal of shadows blocking the opening in the roof of the keep suddenly fractured. A crystalline body exploded from the rain of black debris, but before it could lunge at the three defenders, two arrows struck its head — Kai pierced its left eye, while Slayer pierced its right eye.

The body of the enormous crystal insect plummeted down, while another got stuck in the swiftly mending barricade — it would have freed itself a second later, but before that happened, a black arrow slid in the crack between its thorax and abdomen, severing the Great

Beast in two.

Slayer had killed it, and therefore, the [Handy Bracelet] spoke into Sunny's ear:

[You have slain an enemy.]

He scowled.

'What am I missing?'

Just then, the largest of the barricades — the one blocking the gate of the keep — was torn open by a wide fracture.

Crystalline bodies filled the breach.

Grasping his odachi, Sunny rushed forward.

'Whatever it is, I hope I'll figure it out soon…'

He dove into the familiar cradle of battle.

Chapter-2328: Crown of Horns

Sunny rushed forward as the first of the crystalline insects burst through the breach. These great glasslike horrors looked somewhat like monstrous bees, but also somewhat like abominable ants… considering their warlike behavior, however, he decided to call them the Crystal Wasps.

The Crystal Wasps were Great Beasts, while he was a Supreme Titan. By all means, he was supposed to be much more powerful as far as pure physical prowess went… but it was not that simple. After all, his was a human body, while their physique was anything but.

Both a mouse and an elephant were beasts, but were they equal in strength? No. Similarly, humans were often physically inferior to Nightmare Creatures, even if their Rank was the same.

Sunny was still a Titan, though, so even his modest human body was stronger, faster, and more resilient than each of the monstrous abominations. And, of course, nothing really prevented him from assuming a different form.

As Sunny dashed forward, his body turned into a surging wave of unfathomable darkness and then solidified into the fearsome shape of a four-armed fiend. This time, he wasn't creating a Shell from the surrounding shadows — instead, he simply turned himself into a Shadowspawn.

After all, Sunny was himself a shadow now. His human appearance was merely a form he assumed, so if he was familiar with a different one well enough, he could just as easily become something else.

His Shadowspawn form looked pretty much exactly as the Devil he had been in the Second Nightmare — towering at three meters in height, encased in the fearsome black carapace of the Jade Mantle, and with four hands ready to tear and rend the flesh of his enemies.

If there was one difference, though, it was that seven horns were crowning his head now instead of four.

Suddenly, the Crystal Wasps did not dwarf him anymore. Neither were they as threatening anymore…

But they were still Great Beasts. Even if Sunny was stronger than them, he was still vulnerable to their malice. And… there were a lot of them. Many more than he would have chosen to face, if there was a choice.

No being of the Great Rank could be taken lightly.

He poured more shadows into his odachi, increasing its length to nearly three meters. Almost at the same time, the Crystal Wasps ignited with blinding radiance, chasing the darkness away — as if sunlight had been stored in their glasslike bodies.

A wave of scorching heat washed over him, making him frown.

'Curious…'

That ability of theirs… was that how they built their hives? By melting tunnels in the ice?

There was no time to ponder.

The first of the abominations was already upon Sunny — or rather, he was upon it. Slicing off its crystalline leg, which was poised to pierce his chest, Sunny rammed the creature with his shoulder and at the same time grabbed its terrifying, razor-sharp mandibles with two of his four hands, pushing its head to the side and preventing it from biting a huge chunk of his flesh off.

A split second later, he spun his odachi and slashed downward. The nimble abomination easily dodged his strike even while reeling from being slammed into…

However, it still convulsed and toppled, its lifeless body suddenly growing brittle and shattering into countless shards with a melodious ringing.

That was because Sunny had never aimed for the Crystal Wasp, to begin with — instead, his black odachi had severed its shadow from its glasslike body, thus destroying its soul.

It wasn't easy to destroy the soul of a Great Beast in one strike, even when striking its shadow. However, Sunny's killing intent was especially fatal, because his will to kill was especially firm — the touch of his black blade carried uncompromising lethality, as if imbued with an echo of death itself.

The Crystal Wasp died instantly, unable to offer much resistance. That said… Sunny had not expected its body to crumble into countless shards. He had been planning to toss the corpse of the Great Beast at the other abominations rushing at him, thus slowing them down.

Instead, another insect-like Nightmare Creature was already lunging at him through the cloud of falling shards, a split second away from biting into his neck.

Sunny reeled back to block the glass mandibles with his odachi, holding the hilt with two hands and bracing the flat of its blade with two more. The impact was tyrannical enough to push him back, but instead of falling and being buried under the mass of the abomination, Sunny collapsed into the shadows and shot out of them behind the enemy almost at the same moment, his odachi falling down to split the enemy in two.

[You have slain an enemy.]

Spinning to face the next Crystal Wasp, Sunny saw that the barricade of shadows he was fervently repairing was continuing to crumble, and that four more abominations had made their way inside the keep in the time it took him to kill two.

Nevertheless, he was surprised by something.

'Huh?'

Why were the Crystal Wasps… weaker than he had expected?

They still possessed the dire power one would expect from Great

Beasts, but it was significantly lower than it was supposed to be… then it had been, back when they were escaping the Ice Hive on the slopes of the snowy mountain.

Two abominations lunged at him at great speed, their radiant bodies creating a dizzying movement of light and shadows. The ash covering the floor rose like a whirlwind in the wake of their violent passage.

'The ash…'

Sunny moved, raising his odachi to impale one of the abominations and at the same time catching the second one in the air.

This time, he did what Nephis had advised him to do, wrapping his will around his entire self instead of focusing primarily on his weapon. It was easy to feel the difference — despite being outnumbered, Sunny did not feel like the world was fighting against him just as hard.

The willpower of the Ice Hive was pressuring him like a crushing wave, but strangely enough, Sunny was like a fish, cutting through it almost with ease.

He slammed one of the Crystal Wasps into the floor, causing the entire Ash Castle to tremble and for a web of cracks to appear on its transparent carapace.

The second abomination was impaled on his great odachi, but that did not seem to slow it down much — its scythe-like legs scraped against the surface of the Jade Mantle, and the creature pushed itself lower across the length of the black sword, aiming to shred Sunny to pieces.

The weight of its body was immense enough to make him stagger.

His armored foot descended upon the Crystal Wasp on the floor, shattering its already cracked head, and at the same time, his tail wrapped itself around the second abomination's thin neck.

[You have slain an enemy.]

Falling on all fours — on all six, to be precise — Sunny used his tail

to send the Great Beast flying back. As if shot from a sling, the abomination flew through the air and crashed into its advancing kin.

'That's four.'

In the time it took Sunny to kill four Crystal Wasps…

Eight more had breached the barricade. The wall of shadows was collapsing faster than he could repair it, and the breach was growing wider with each second.

Sunny looked at the mass of crystalline abominations somberly.

'...Damnation.'

Chapter-2329: Defensive Advantage

Sunny had faced seven Saints as a Transcendent, and now, he had to face a swarm of Great Beasts as a Supreme. The crystalline bodies of the eerily beautiful abominations were shining blindingly with imprisoned sunlight, and shadows danced as they moved.

Flakes of ash swirled in the air.

'Ash…'

Moving between shadows, Sunny suddenly had an epiphany.

He had noted that the Crystal Wasps seemed weakened, and now, he suddenly understood why. The answer lay in the rules of Death Game.

As Seishan had mentioned, positioning and territorial conquest played an important role in this ancient game — that way, the power of Domains was expressed through rules.

Figures had an advantage while defending squares of the same color… and were disadvantaged when attacking squares of the opposite color. The disadvantage diminished the more the besieged square was surrounded by the enemy Domain.

Ariel's Game was based on the same rules, so…

The Ash Castle bordered two volcanoes and one snowy mountain… actually, was it three snowy mountains? Did diagonal borders count? In any case, it was not entirely surrounded by the Snow Domain, which meant that Sunny was supposed to have some kind of advantage.

He had not felt any boost to his power, though, which meant that his advantage lay elsewhere — to be precise, it was the abominations of the Snow Domain who were weakened by the surrounding ash.

'That is good to know.'

Another piece of the puzzle was solved, and armed with that knowledge, he would be able to plan his subsequent moves better.

For now, however, Sunny had to survive the enemy move.

His mastery of Shadow Step, which had long been woven into his battle art, allowed him a supreme degree of mobility on the battlefield. That was why the Crystal Wasps could not immediately overwhelm him despite their superior numbers…

Sadly, Sunny was not entirely free to move however he wanted, either — after all, he was supposed to serve as an impenetrable wall between the abominations and his allies. Therefore, he could not allow the Great Beasts to advance too far into the interior of the Ash Castle, meaning that he had to spend most of his time in front of the advancing swarm.

The issue was further exacerbated by the fact that in a battle between Great Nightmare Creatures and a Supreme being, the distinction between tangible and intangible was less meaningful than it would be for weaker creatures. In other words, the attacks of the Crystal Wasps were imbued by their frenzied will and could therefore pursue him into the shadows.

'Curse it!'

The shadows shifted again, pushed around by the radiant abominations, and Sunny was forced to step out of them a few meters away from where he wanted to be. Unwilling to let the opportunity pass, Sunny transformed his odachi into a long spear and thrust it forward, piercing the joint of a Crystal Wasp's leg.

He wrenched his spear, destroying the joint completely, and immediately leaped back. In the next moment, another abomination was already in the spot where he had been before, its terrifying

mandibles closing on nothing but emptiness.

Sunny did not miss the chance to bring the butt of his spear upward, slamming it with ferocious force into the underside of the creature's head. Its skull cracked, and one of the mandibles shattered. Continuing to retreat, Sunny turned his torso and pushed his spear forward, piercing the eye of a different enemy, then spun it to drive two more a step back.

With how overwhelmed he was by the enemy numbers, Sunny only managed to kill two more Crystal Wasps after the initial four. The rest of them were battered and bore gruesome wounds, but were very much alive — and more were already entering through the breach, as well.

Just then, however, a black arrow slid into the crack on the skull of the abomination he had struck with the back of his spear. The Great Beast died instantly.

Another arrow struck the Crystal Wasp who was moving slower than the rest due to the joint he had destroyed, making its massive body explode violently into a cloud of glass shards.

[You have slain an enemy.]

Having already finished off a few abominations, Kai and Slayer were helping as best they could.

But there were just too many beasts.

Sunny could sense them scurrying across the exterior of the Ash Castle, forcing their way inside…

His artillery support had managed to keep the Crystal Wasps off his back until now, but things were swiftly turning from bad to worse.

That was because, apart from the main barricade, the other two seals of shadows were crumbling too. The crystalline abominations were ramming their bodies into them with dreadful force, making the entire castle rattle and shake. Slayer was already splitting her attention between the main entrance and the lower seal — Kai would have to concentrate entirely on the upper seal, soon.

It was unclear how long the two of them would be able to hold the Crystal Wasps back.

Catching his spear with his lower hands, Sunny moved it in a wide horizontal arch to behead a wounded abomination, and at the same time caught another one with his upper hands. As the claws of his gauntlets sank into the crystalline carapace, he strained his muscles and viciously ripped the massive beast in two.

That cost him.

Not a moment later, something slammed into his back, and he felt a sharp pain permeating his body. Roaring, he spun, grabbed the attacking Crystal Wasp by the neck, and then slammed its head with his own.

The abomination's head exploded into a rain of shards, and it fell into the ash, lifeless.

[You have slain an enemy.]

'This can't go on much longer…'

What was he missing?

A part of his mind was still trying to puzzle out the strange feeling of failing to realize something.

As he did, an especially violent impact shook the castle, and the upper seal collapsed completely.

Pale light poured into the dark interior of the keep, and then the darkness was torn apart by the radiant figures of the Crystal Wasps that burst inside, spreading to scurry across the ceiling.

Slayer dodged a falling piece of rabble and gracefully dismissed her bow. Unsheathing her two swords, she lingered for a moment and tossed one of them to Kai.

He caught it easily and flew back, hovering just behind her.

"Sunny? What's the plan?!"

Losing his cover fire, Sunny was forced to retreat, as well.

Stepping out of the shadows back to back with them, he allowed himself to return to his human form and looked at the swarm of Great Beasts surrounding them from all sides.

'Ah... I see now.'

His lips twisted into a vicious smile.

"No worries. Leave it to me, buddy… my plan is to slaughter them all!"

Chapter-2330: Volcanic Glass

Sunny was no stranger to strategic retreats. There was no shame in running away with his tail tucked between his legs — when facing an enemy that he could not defeat, that was the best choice.

And just a few moments ago, Sunny had been sure that they would not be able to defeat the Ice Hive.

The problem, though, was that there was nowhere for them to retreat. They were trapped on the volcano, and trying to escape it would provoke the ire of the being that dwelled beneath the clouds… Sunny had considered destroying the chains holding the Ash Castle above the main vent and plummeting into the fiery depths with the Crystal Wasps, but that did not seem like a good idea either.

And then, it hit him.

[You have slain an enemy.]

'Ah…'

Sunny suddenly realized that there was a disadvantage to possessing overwhelming strength.

Being strong tended to make one stupid.

He had grown powerful enough as a Sovereign to develop bad habits… no, truthfully, it might have started to happen all the way back when he was a Saint.

When Sunny had been weak, he obsessively considered every single possibility to find a way to survive. But after becoming strong, he fell into the habit of relying more on his strength than on his mind, wrecking his enemies like a Supreme sledgehammer.

That was why he had been slow to understand how to defeat the Ice Hive.

'I have slain these enemies.'

Sunny had killed about ten Crystal Wasps, and Slayer had killed a dozen more — first as they flew across the sea of clouds, and then here in the main keep of the Ash Castle.

The Handy Bracelet had announced the kills, even if it couldn't determine the Rank and Class of the slain enemies. It couldn't determine them because Sunny's cores were already saturated, and he received no shadow fragments for the kills.

However, that did not mean that he received nothing.

The shades of the slain Crystal Wasps would still enter his Soul Sea. Even if Sunny had no access to his Soul Sea and was cut off from his Domain, they would…

He was pretty sure that even Ariel would not have been able to change that.

And why would he?

'Why would Ariel rob the Ash Tyrant of all power?'

Sunny and Kai could not summon new Memories, but the Memories they had summoned before entering Ariel's Game were still working as intended. He was pretty sure that if he created new ones, they would be able to use them as well.

Apart from that... some facets of their Aspects were suppressed, but their Aspect Abilities still worked just fine.

Sunny could use his Dormant, Awakened, Ascended, and Transcendent Abilities…

So why wouldn't he be able to use his Supreme Ability?

His Domain was not gone, after all. It was merely replaced with the Domain of Ash. Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that his Supreme

Ability was also substituted instead of being entirely blocked?

What was the point of granting him a Domain if he could not make use of it?

'I see now. This… should work, right?'

Having thought that, Sunny immediately erased the thought from his mind.

A new thought took its place:

'I see now. This will definitely work.'

There was no place for doubt if one wanted to force his will upon the world. And Sunny was going to do just that.

Even if he could not enter his Soul Sea and summon the shades he had earned before entering Ariel's Game…

Who was to say that he could not summon the shades he had earned after entering it?

Even if someone said it, Sunny was not obliged to believe them.

So, just as the Crystal Wasps surrounded them — some of them rushing across the ash covering the floor of the castle, some moving across its ceiling — Sunny inhaled deeply and turned into a shadow.

Then, he activated his Supreme Ability, opening a gate between his soul and the world…

And called upon the shades.

For a moment, nothing happened.

"S—sunny?"

Kai's voice sounded nervous. Slayer, meanwhile, crouched into a low stance, preparing to take as many Great Beasts as she could with her into the embrace of death.

Then, a gust of cold wind blew across the interior of the Ash Castle,

and the ash stirred.

The ash stirred and rose, forming dark shapes.

Just as the Crystal Wasps rushed to devour Sunny and his companions, Obsidian Wasps — shades formed by ash, their bodies resembling volcanic glass — rose to face them.

There were twenty of them, so the enemy still outnumbered the defenders of the castle manyfold…

But it did not matter.

Because with each Great Nightmare Creature they killed, a Supreme shade would join the ranks of the defenders.

Assuming his corporeal form once again, Sunny grinned and threw a poignant look at Kai.

The charming archer seemed to have lost the ability to speak for a second.

"As I said, don't worry. You see, Kai… death always wins."

Because death was inevitable.

With that, Sunny tossed his spear into the mass of Crystal Wasps, killing one of them, and rushed forward while manifesting a new weapon out of the shadows.

A violent battle took place in the Ash Castle, making it quake and rattle. A few of the shades were destroyed, and then, a few more. But new ones immediately took their place, lunging at the crystalline insects without fear or doubt. Even if each individual Obsidian Wasp was weaker than their former kin due to not possessing the Will, the Titan who had summoned them did.

Sunny could also fight much more freely now that he was supported by a small army of shades. As a result, his lethality increased explosively.

Kai and Slayer did not waste any time, either…

Soon enough, the outcome of the battle hung in precarious balance. The Ice Swarm had been reduced almost by half, and the number of the ash shades swelled. Victory was not decided yet, but Sunny felt that the odds were in their favor.

It was then that a subtle ripple seemed to spread through the world.

Almost at the same moment, the remaining Crystal Wasps did something strange…

They all turned around and rushed away, escaping the Ash Castle.

Sunny was startled.

'Are they… fleeing?'

Since when had Nightmare Creatures — mere Beasts, no less — had enough presence of mind to suppress their frenzy and flee from an unfavorable battle?

Frowning, he followed the Crystal Wasps outside.

Cresting the edge of the caldera, Sunny witnessed a stunning sight.

The Crystal Wasps were flying back to the distant mountain.

The sun had risen above the horizon, and the golden light of dawn turned into bright daylight.

And almost as soon as dawn burned itself out…

The resplendent radiance of the ethereal glass bridges dimmed.

The gossamer bridges crumbled, turning into plumes of snow, and were dispersed by the wind.

Before too long, nothing connected the lonesome mountains once again.

The dawn was over, and with it, the enemy move came to an end.

Chapter-2331: Last Square

The sun had risen above the realm of clouds and mountains… above the world of Ariel's Game.

The ethereal, glistening bridges turned to snow under its radiance.

Sunny was standing on the edge of the caldera, his battered armor slowly repairing itself, as he looked north — there, far away, the surviving Crystal Wasps had landed on the slopes of the snowy peak and disappeared into the countless entrances to the Ice Hive.

'The enemy move is over.'

Taking a deep breath, he looked west.

There, the giant body of the Snow Worm was coiled around the volcano, its pale flesh standing out starkly against the black ash.

Then, he looked east… somewhere out there, the clockwork giant was standing in the ash, as well.

The Ash Castle had withstood the siege, but the other two volcanoes were now conquered by the Snow Domain.

As Sunny watched, a startling change took place.

Two pillars of lava shot out of the conquered volcanoes, swiftly solidifying in the cold air. At the same time, the snowstorm veiling the distant mountains moved south, consuming the world. It flowed past the Ash Castle, sparing it the elemental fury, and completely obscured the neighboring volcanoes.

Just then, Kai landed on the ash beside him.

"What is going on? Why did they retreat?"

Sunny hesitated for a while, struggling against the powerful winds as he looked into the swirling mass of snow that swallowed the world, sparing only the billowing clouds of ash above the Ash Castle.

"They retreated because their time ran out. It seems that Snow figures can only move at dawn."

He paused for a moment, then added slowly:

"I guess the Ash figures can only move at dusk, then."

Sunny imagined ash blowing across the sea of crimson clouds, turning into obsidian bridges in the fiery glow of the dying sun.

Yes… that would make sense.

He looked at Kai.

"As for what is going on… I think we will see soon. Two more squares were conquered by the Snow Domain."

Just as he finished speaking, the violent winds suddenly settled down, and the great snowstorm passed. Dark clouds still boiled above the Ash Castle, but the rest of the world was resting under a clear blue sky now.

The other two volcanoes… had disappeared.

Or rather, transformed.

The deep calderas were buried under solidified lava, turning into sharp peaks. The thick layers of ash had been blown away by the wind. The dark slopes were stripped bare, and then covered in snow.

Two snowy peaks stood where the fuming volcanoes had been just minutes ago, and the Ash Castle was now completely surrounded by the Snow Domain.

It was the last black square left on the board.

'Well… that sucks.'

Sunny sighed, then patted Kai on the shoulder.

"I'm going to be quite busy, but you can rest until evening. We'll do something exciting then."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"Sure, I'll… wait. What are we going to do in the evening?"

Sunny simply shrugged.

"I have no idea, yet. But… it is bound to be exciting! Isn't it?"

With that, he turned around and headed back to the Ash Castle.

***

Some time later, Sunny was sitting on the floor, feeling a little miserable.

"These damn daemons."

Ariel had done something incredible, hiding forty-nine mountains inside a game board and populating them with powerful abominations. The Demon of Dread was truly great and terrible.

But, that godly bastard…

Did he not think to provide the poor Nightmare Creatures imprisoned in his game with basic necessities?

There was no food to be found anywhere, unless Sunny wanted to dine on an infinite amount of worm meat. Much worse, there was no water. The figures of the Snow Domain could at least melt the snow to quench their thirst, but what was he supposed to do? Was he supposed to melt ash? How would that work?

Sunny shook his head dejectedly.

Of course, he did not really need to eat or drink. As a Supreme demigod, he could simply sustain himself by absorbing essence, and more than that, he was a shadow, not a real human. But not needing

food and not wanting to eat were two different matters — otherwise, he would not have been pampering Nephis with delicious meals at every opportunity.

There was Kai to consider, as well. As a Saint, he could last quite a while without water, but not to the degree of not needing it at all.

Perhaps Ariel had not designed this game for humans.

'One more problem to solve…'

As Sunny was relaxing on the soft ash, there was a lot of activity around him.

After all, just because he was sitting and doing nothing didn't mean that he was doing nothing.

All around him, the shades of the Crystal Wasps were busy at work. There were a couple of dozen of them left intact, while the rest were being rebuilt and repaired within the dark depths of his soul. Some were collecting soul shards of their fallen kin… or maybe even retrieving them from their own corpses… while some were gathering and sorting crystal fragments themselves.

Sunny observed his worker wasps with a curious expression, wondering if they would be able to focus sunlight into annihilating beams with their obsidian wings. If they could, then he would be able to melt the snow on the mountains from a distance, then collect the water in some kind of giant reservoir…

As he considered this matter, Kai descended from above and landed on the ash near him. Glancing at Slayer, who was standing motionlessly behind Sunny, he bowed politely and offered her the short sword she had lent him previously.

"Thank you, Lady… uh… Lady Slayer."

Slayer looked at him before accepting the sword and sheathing it silently.

Kai shivered under her gaze, then sat down near Sunny and exhaled slowly.

Sunny glanced at him:

"How are your wounds?"

Kai had been caught in that first solar attack, but it was hard to say how bad his burns were underneath the armor.

The charming archer shook his head with a smile.

"It's nothing serious. As I mentioned, I am not easily burned."

Sunny clicked his tongue.

"That might be true, but we are stuck here without a healer, and there are many battles ahead. Such small wounds will accumulate if we're not careful."

His own back was shredded pretty badly. Luckily, he healed at stunning speed as a Supreme — this wound would be gone in no more than a day.

Of course, a new one would very likely take its place.

Kai hesitated for a few moments, then said suddenly:

"We… we really defeated a hundred Great Beasts, didn't we?"

He shook his head in disbelief.

Sunny lingered with the answer.

Eventually, he said:

"I guess we did. That… was a humbling experience, wasn't it?"

Kai chuckled.

"Humbling? I wouldn't say that. I think it was more of an unbelievable experience."

He looked at Sunny, swept his hair back, and then said ruefully:

"I know that I'll regret asking… but that was probably a routine battle

for you, wasn't it?"

Sunny studied Kai for a few moments, then shook his head with a faint smile.

"No… actually, that was a novel level of peril even for me."

Chapter-2332: Payday

Sunny chuckled.

"Actually, I haven't felt this weak in a long while. It was a good reminder, though — I was beginning to grow arrogant."

Kai stared at him incredulously for a bit.

"...Beginning? Did you say 'beginning' to grow arrogant?"

Sunny gave him a reproachful look and laughed.

"Ah, right. Your first impression of me was meeting the Lord of Shadows. Don't let it deceive you, though — that haughty guy is merely one of the roles I played. The real me is not nearly as conceited."

He scoffed.

"I mean, why does someone as incredibly wealthy, unimaginably powerful, and unbearably handsome as I even have to be conceited?

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"In... deed. I think I understand. I had to play the role of myself for a long time, too, back when I was a singer. I guess you had your reasons."

He paused for a moment, then asked curiously:

"But what is the real you like, then?"

Sunny shrugged.

"The real me? Oh… I am a modest man with modest goals. All I really want is to run a quaint cafe, make a little money on the side by

selling Memories, become a god, and go on romantic dates with my girlfriend from time to time."

Kai stared at him silently for a moment.

"Excuse me? What was that in the middle?"

Sunny smiled brightly.

"What, becoming a god? Isn't that a given? One can't even run a cafe in peace these days without becoming a god first… it is honestly annoying. Plus, my angelic girlfriend is a tad ambitious, so I have to keep up!"

Kai coughed a few times.

Sunny, meanwhile, looked at the pile of soul shards the Obsidian Wasps had dutifully put in front of him. The shards shone beautifully, dispelling the deep darkness of the Ash Castle…

His eyes glinted.

"Look at that, Kai. Dozens of Supreme soul shards! Can you even imagine how much this pile costs? That is… at least a crapton of credits right there!"

Kai looked at the radiant shards, remained silent for a moment, then smiled with a hint of wistfulness in his mesmerizing green eyes.

"Oh. Indeed. You… reminded me of someone just now, when you said that."

Sunny glanced at him briefly.

"You mean Aiko? Right, she used to work for you at one point, didn't she?"

Kai nodded.

"Yeah. She was my manager after I Awakened. But we haven't seen each other in a while. How… is she doing?"

Sunny let out a laugh.

"Aiko? Oh, she is having a blast. It is a bit funny — she used to run a gambling den in the Bright Castle, but now she pretty much runs the entire Dark City. She also manages Shadow Clan's network all over both worlds… running a secret organization of that scale is a complicated affair, so she spends a lot of time in Bastion."

Kai let out a quiet sigh.

"That's good. I'm happy that she's happy. Although, to be honest… I am a little surprised. We went our separate ways because I wanted to follow the Path of Ascension and use my power for a noble cause, while she wanted nothing to do with causes after the Forgotten Shore. I thought she wanted to be a civilian. So, I didn't expect her to end up as a Sovereign's personal assistant."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well, it just ended up like that. I didn't set out to exploit her that way — initially, I simply hired her to help me run a Memory shop. But one thing led to another, and before I knew it, she was in charge of my entire operation."

He blinked a couple of times.

"Come to think of it… wait, have I been conned? Did she hoodwink me into bankrolling her shady underground empire with my fortune?!"

Kai laughed.

"No, no. I am sure you are exploiting a mere Awakened like her, Supreme Sunless, and not the other way around. Definitely."

Sunny grinned.

"Yeah… yeah, of course! Obviously."

Finishing enjoying the view of the soul shards, he turned to several piles of crystal fragments instead. The Obsidian Wasps had chosen only the suitable ones, separating them into several large piles by

shape and size.

He picked one up and traced his finger along its edge. His jade skin was instantly cut… which was impressive enough.

No blood seeped out of the cut, and a few moments later, it had already healed itself.

"Wonderful."

The soul shards would become the anchors for weaves of the Memories he wanted to create, but the remains of the Crystal Wasps could serve as an excellent medium for the enchantments.

After all, Memories had to be crafted from something, and materials harvested from Great Nightmare Creatures were superior to permanently manifested shadows. These crystalline shards were especially sharp and durable, making them perfect for crafting arrowheads.

Actually… there was someone here who was quite amazing at crafting arrows from similar materials. Slayer had spent thousands of years making her own weapons from what she could find in the Shadow Realm, and the most readily available resource there was obsidian.

Sunny looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey. How about helping me with this?"

She stared at him coldly, which made him clear his throat.

"Oh. Right…"

It was time for another payment.

Sunny used the same shard of crystal to slice open his forearm — this time, the cut swiftly swelled with blood.

Slayer finally moved, lowering herself to one knee beside him under Kai's startled gaze.

She put her hands together and placed them under his arm, allowing his blood to flow into them. When the chalice of her hands was nearly full, Sunny stemmed the bleeding and watched as she raised them to her veiled lips.

A few moments later, the blood was gone. Slayer did not really drink it — instead, it was simply absorbed into her ebony skin, disappearing forever behind the veil.

Her dark eyes were distant, full of some vague, indescribable emotions for a heartbeat.

Then, the hint of emotion was replaced by the familiar, cold malice.

Kai stammered.

"W—what was that?"

Watching his cut heal, Sunny chuckled and looked at him with a smile.

"That?"

He shrugged.

"That was payday."

Chapter-2333: Pit Stop

Slayer seemed satisfied with her payment. Of course, it was a little tactless of her to demand his blood when they were imprisoned in a deadly daemonic realm — but, actually, she was being unexpectedly considerate.

After all, it did not escape Sunny's attention that the murderous Shadow had foregone their usual duel. He had fully expected that Slayer would attack him as soon as there was a chance, but she seemed to have decided against it.

This was the first time Slayer spared him the hassle of beating her into submission.

'I guess we're making progress.'

Tossing the crystal shard back onto the pile, Sunny pointed to Kai's bow.

"Give that here."

Receiving it, he studied the weapon thoughtfully. Unlike the arrows, he was not planning to turn the bow into a Memory — doing that would have required imbuing it with permanence, which would weaken it. But that did not mean that he could not enchant it.

Sunny had created plenty of enchanted items that were not Memories, after all, like various implements for the Brilliant Emporium and the Beast Farm. The fundamental weaves shared by all Memories, and which therefore defined what a Memory was, were so ingeniously designed and useful that there was usually no reason not to bestow them on a weapon or a piece of equipment.

But that did not mean that they were necessary. It was just that the spellweave had to be woven a bit differently for an enchanted item

that was not a Memory.

For example, Awakened usually needed to activate the enchantments of their Memories with essence, and only the essence of the person to whom the Memory belonged could do the job. The Memory itself was a concept moored to the master's soul, while manifesting it turned their soul essence into matter — so, there was an innate connection between Awakened and their Memories.

An enchanted item was different, since it was inherently ownerless. So, Sunny had to either weave the identity of the master into the enchantments or change their activation principle entirely, allowing them to accept anyone's soul essence.

The latter offered a sea of possibilities.

Sunny was especially concerned about Kai's reserve of essence — the charming archer was merely a Transcendent Beast, after all, so his essence capacity was one seventh of what Sunny himself had possessed as a Saint. The enemies they faced, meanwhile, were immensely powerful…

Kai would need as much firepower as he could get to fight them effectively, but truly potent enchantments would burn through his soul essence in seconds. There would be no time for him to fully replenish it, either, considering that they might need to enter battle twice a day.

Sunny had to strike a careful balance between potency and sustainability — if the bow could accept anyone's essence, however, he could assist Kai by using his own.

He could even make the bow an essence vessel and saturate it with powerful Supreme essence in advance.

'Hmm…'

Sunny sighed.

Now that he had become the ruler of the Ash Domain — which was reduced to a single volcano — he felt like a pauper again. His tens of thousands of shades were gone, and the seemingly boundless river of

spirit essence that constantly flowed into his soul had run dry. Compared to what he usually enjoyed, there was merely a trickle.

So, he couldn't go all out and supply Kai with an ocean of his essence. Additionally, Sunny did not know how to make his essence follow the charming archer's commands. It was an interesting challenge, though… he was not sure that he could solve it, but he felt like he could cheat it somehow, at least to some degree.

'Yeah… that solution might work. This one, too. I just have to be modest in my ambition.'

He could not replace Kai's essence with his own, but he could at least supplement it.

As for enchantments themselves, Sunny was no stranger to crafting bows and arrows. He had gone through the process of designing the optimal combination both for Rain and for Slayer, so all he had to do was adjust a few things with Kai's Aspect in mind.

For example…

Unlike most archers, Kai could see through solid objects. So, wouldn't it be prudent to design him an arrow that could phase through matter?

'Wait. Such an arrow would be amazing in the hands of any skilled archer!'

Why had he not made one before?

Well… it was probably because making things pass through matter was not that simple. He could potentially play with tangible and intangible states, maybe even use an altered version of the [Unseen] enchantment of the Moonlight Shard, but there were a few obstacles to overcome.

Making an arrow pass through solid matter was simple in theory, but in practice, there was no such thing as simple matter in the Dream Realm. All materials had their own mystical properties — especially so the bodies of living beings. So as much as Sunny wanted to make an arrow that would phase through the armor of an abomination and

strike directly at the tender flesh beneath, he couldn't... for now.

Making an arrow that could phase through a mass of rock and strike an enemy hiding behind it, though?

That was a possibility.

'Oh, my… I'm inspired…'

Summoning four shadow hands, Sunny lamented the absence of Weaver's Needle and got to work.

He would work on the bow first, then the quiver, and finally craft a few arrows.

Kai needed some kind of melee weapon, as well. The weapon could be crafted from the larger pieces of shattered crystal left behind by the slain Wasps… there were Supreme materials and Supreme soul shards at Sunny's disposal, so he would be able to create something truly devastating.

The only limit was time. He had until sunset to prepare Kai for battle, so he had to be modest in his ambition.

'That's alright… I can take it one step at a time.'

He could weave a basic enchantment for the bow and create a couple of arrows today. Then, he could continue to improve the bow and add new arrows to Kai's arsenal after each battle. There would be more dead abominations and more materials for him to work with, as well… his Beasts would continue to grow stronger with each day.

His army of shades would continue to grow in number, as well.

Which was a good thing…

Because, at the end of it all, they would have to face the Snow Tyrant.

'We are going to need all the power in the world to kill that thing, for sure…'

Sunny became engrossed in weaving.

Chapter-2334: Bitter Solitude

As Sunny worked, Kai remained silent for a while, resting. It did not seem like he was ready to sleep, and there was nothing really for him to do on the barren volcano.

The charming archer looked at the walls of the crumbling fortress for a while — or rather, through them. He was observing their enemies, most likely.

The remaining Crystal Wasps, the snow worm, the clockwork giant…

"Stop staring at the terrifying Nightmare Creatures, Kai. That will only wind you up more, not help you recover."

Kai slowly looked away from whatever horror he was observing and focused on Sunny. Eventually, he asked:

"That is a strange form of sorcery. I don't think I've ever seen anyone enchant something in that way before."

Sunny nodded.

"I don't think there's anyone else capable of performing this form of sorcery in the world, anymore. I'm the only one."

Kai had to have an idea of what his Aspect Abilities were. So, he would know that creating Memories was a skill Sunny possessed, not an Ability.

The charming archer looked at him with interest.

"How did you learn it?"

Sunny answered without looking up, his six hands forming the spellweave inside the black bow, one string of shadow essence at a time.

"Oh. One of my Attributes allows me to see the spellweave of Memories, while another one allows me to touch it. One time… I was in a pretty desperate situation. So I figured out how to create a rudimentary Memory to escape it."

He smiled faintly.

"Then, it was just a lot of research, study, and experimentation. I slowly taught myself how to do more by watching what the Spell does."

He glanced at Kai briefly.

"What about you? You seem to be perfectly suited for Shaping, with that Aspect of yours. Have you not tried to master it?"

Kai chuckled.

"Oh… I tried. I seem to be a special case, though. Some people have a talent for Shaping, while some people don't. What I have, however, is negative talent."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

Kai shrugged with a smile.

"Because of my Aspect, the True Names I invoke are extremely powerful. In exchange, however, it is especially difficult for me to master them… Lady Nephis thinks that it's the way for the world to balance things out."

He sighed.

"I can't even speak the Names as a human — at least not yet. I can invoke them pretty easily as a dragon, though, almost as if a dragon's maw is meant to bellow them. But it's of no use, really, since I can barely keep the Names in my mind. Even after years of effort, I've only mastered a meager few."

Sunny contemplated his words for a few moments.

"I'm not buying that someone like you is not meant to be a Shaper. Maybe you just have not met the condition to master the Sorcery of Names, yet. Things will probably change dramatically when you reach a higher Rank. Alternatively… it might be connected to your Aspect Legacy. Or not. You have not received it yet, have you?"

Kai shook his head.

"No. But I don't see how an Aspect Legacy can help me become a better sorcerer. Aren't Legacy Relics usually just powerful Memories?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Usually, yes. But not always. Oh, and technically, Legacy Relics do not need to be powerful — they just need to complement your Aspect greatly."

He pointed to himself with one of his forty-two fingers.

"Take me, for example. My Aspect Legacy is actually a… skillset, of sorts. I developed it myself, but the Spell had helped me take the first step — or rather, take it faster. It also used to reward me with Relics when I reached certain milestones. Then there is Nephis, whose Aspect Legacy is based in understanding, and who is rewarded for it with nothing except knowledge."

He returned to weaving the strings of shadow essence.

"So even though most Aspect Legacies are indeed Memories, or more rarely Echoes, not all of them are."

They remained silent for a while.

At some point, however, Kai studied him with a neutral expression and asked tentatively:

"Sunny… can I ask you something?"

Sunny nodded while keeping his focus on the black bow.

Kai hesitated for a few moments.

"Before… you told me that my survival would depend on my companions, while their survival would depend on me. That no one survives in the Dream Realm alone."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"So I did."

Kai lingered for a while.

"But you were living in Godgrave all alone when we met. A solitary Saint, all alone in the world. Did… did you speak from experience, or was it simply common wisdom?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

A Saint… a Saint was someone who had braved the Dream Realm and conquered three Nightmares. As far as Sunny knew, there was only one person who had conquered the Third Nightmare alone — the Princess of War, Morgan of Valor.

Kai seemed to be curious about his previous solitude.

He sighed.

"I spoke from experience. I had someone to depend on, too, in the past. I had companions."

'You were one of them, dummy.'

Kai looked at him mournfully, not saying anything… and yet, it seemed like he wanted Sunny to say more.

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, it did not end well."

He picked up one more soul shard and placed it into the weave, carefully anchoring countless strings of essence to it.

"It did not end well because I betrayed my companions, and lost them. I want to say that I had a good reason to abandon them…

maybe I did… but in the end, it was a selfish reason. I am a very selfish person, Kai. I am a very greedy person as well. My selfish greed was my undoing."

What would have happened if Sunny had stayed with his cohort and faced the First Seeker with them? If he had made a different wish?

Would it have been for the best? Or would he have spent the rest of his days living in regret?

Had he made an unforgivable mistake?

He did not know.

He did know that he regretted losing his companions bitterly, though.

Some days, it felt too bitter to endure.

Kai shook his head slowly.

"You do not look like someone who is undone, Sunny."

There was some truth to that. Sunny was a Sovereign, after all.

He looked at Kai and smiled.

"...Looks can be deceiving."

Chapter-2335: Changing Shadow

After that, the conversation fizzled out. Sunny focused on weaving, while Kai tactfully gave him some space.

'This is... a bit tricky...'

Sunny had done quite a bit of weaving in his life, but he could not remember ever having to enchant something on such a strict deadline. One day was really not enough to create something worthy, but he put great effort into arming Kai as best he could.

He also decided to design a set of enchantments for the bow that could be implemented in stages. That was a new approach for him and required a different way of creating a weave. But if Sunny succeeded here, he could potentially save himself a lot of trouble in the future.

After all, up until now, he always had to complete the entire weave in one go — otherwise, the unfinished pattern of shadow strings would swiftly collapse as soon as Sunny released his hold on it. If he could come up with a way to prevent that from happening, he would have far fewer headaches while tackling truly complicated enchantments.

Necessity was truly the mother of invention.

Still, Sunny felt hurried and tense while working on the bow.

'I miss my shadows…'

Having one paltry body to work with felt stifling. It was really quite frustrating… how did people even manage to live their entire lives in such an inconvenient way?

"Poor mortals… they must be struggling every day…"

Unthinkable!

Sunny scoffed, remembering his own struggles vaguely. He had grown accustomed to controlling several bodies at the same time a while ago, so the very idea of only possessing one seemed strange now. Not to mention the idea of only perceiving the world through one vessel…

Sunny had been experiencing the world through countless points of view for the past year. Suddenly finding himself all alone in his own head felt both comforting and disconcerting.

…It was through this feeling of strangeness that he realized how far from being a human he had strayed without ever fully realizing it. Sunny knew that he was a shadow now, not a human being — but that was merely a difference of form.

Here in Ariel's Game, however, he had no choice but to admit that his very mind was growing further and further apart from that of a human. It had nothing to do with becoming numb to human emotions, like what Nephis had experienced due to the agony of her Flaw, and more with… the nature of his consciousness itself.

But then again, maybe it was not that different after all, on the fundamental level.

Was it merely a matter of repetition? Sunny remembered how vivid and horrifying his first encounter with a Nightmare Creature had been. But after facing and slaying a myriad of them, he barely felt anything when encountering yet another ghastly horror. He had grown calloused to their presence.

The same held true for human experiences. People naturally changed as they grew older and accumulated calluses on their hearts… the emotions of a wisened old man were deeply different from the feelings of a child, for whom every occasion was new and exciting.

At the same time, there was a natural limit to a human's lifespan, as well as to the number of events they could experience at any given

time.

But what if that limit was removed?

What if a human could live for a thousand years while experiencing a thousand different perspectives? How different would the mind of such a being become, and would it still be even remotely human?

Sunny sighed.

'I'm changing.'

He was still young, and he had already changed so much. What kind of person would he become in a decade?

The fact that his consciousness was slowly transforming to resemble that of a deity was both a promising sign and an eerie omen. It was good to know that he was well on his way to Apotheosis, but still…

Sunny had already seen Supreme humans who had lost most, if not all, of their humanity. The example of Anvil and Ki Song was right in front of his eyes, and they were both hateful.

He hoped that he would never become callous and indifferent to human suffering like they had. That he would not change that much.

'Ah. I miss my True Name, as well.'

A True Name was meant to serve as an anchor of one's self. Without it, the promise of unending change seemed frightening.

That said… even in the throes of unease, Sunny knew that some things about him would never change.

For example, his love for Nephis.

The two of them had been separated many times — by the conflicting nature of their values and beliefs, by the boundaries separating different worlds, by the deadly depths of political strife, and even by fate itself.

And yet, despite it all, they still always ended up together. Nothing

had been able to pull them apart yet, and he knew that nothing would ever be able to pull them apart in the future, either.

That was one constant in his tumultuous life.

'Funny.'

Sunny thought of himself as an anchor that kept Nephis tethered to humanity...

But maybe she was his anchor, as well.

Taking a deep sigh, he forced his six hands to move even faster.

In the end, he succeeded in placing the first enchantment on Kai's bow, as well as crafting two powerful arrows from the crystal shards. He even managed to enchant the charming archer's quiver.

It was a good start…

And there was still some time left before sunset.

Turning his head, Sunny looked at the altar standing at the heart of the Ash Castle.

And at the jade figure of a Snow Beast laying on it.

His eyes narrowed.

'...Shall I?'

Letting Kai experiment with his improved bow and new arrows, Sunny rose from the ash and walked over to the altar. Slayer followed behind, her steps soft and quiet.

Picking up the figure of the Snow Beast, Sunny hesitated for a while.

'I wonder what truth I will learn this time.'

How about learning why the world had ended?

Taking a deep breath, he focused on what he wanted to learn and tossed the jade beast into the billowing smoke.

Chapter-2336: A Strange Truth

The sun was rising above the wine-dark sea. Its gentle rays caressed an island where white stones were drowning in the verdant grass, and colorful flowers blossomed in the pleasant heat. A forest covered the slopes of the island like a carpet, and at its highest point, a woman was resting in the shade of an olive tree.

She wore a knee-length chiton, its pristine fabric as white as snow, with a deer's skin tied around her shoulders. Her hair was cut short, held back by a simple leather band. Her gaze was calm and sober.

As the woman rested, a doe emerged from the forest. Instead of being scared of the human, it approached her tentatively and lowered itself to the ground, resting its head on her lap.

The woman lowered her hand to caress the wild doe gently, her fingers drowning in the soft fur.

Then, she suddenly turned her head and looked at the sea, its surface rising and falling tumultuously.

Far away, a sail appeared from beyond the horizon. A ship was approaching the island, struggling against the waves.

The wind had brought a storm, and with it came the guests.

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Three people disembarked from the ship — an old man, a warrior carrying a round shield, and a child with red hair. They made their way along the winding path and approached an old shrine. The shrine was neither grand nor magnificent, but it emanated a feeling of solemn holiness.

Its walls were built of white marble, with rose vines covering them

like a cloak. An altar stood in front of the shrine, with fire burning in a stone bowl.

The old man made an offering to the altar, placing fresh grapes, leaves of laurel, and hawk feathers on its weathered surface. Finally, he burned incense in the bowl and stepped back, kneeling reverently on the ground.

The warrior stood behind him, leaning on his spear. The child, meanwhile, furtively reached his little hand to snatch the grapes.

Shocked, the old man slapped the boy's hand away.

"Auro!"

The boy flinched away and stumbled, his lips trembling.

"Let him have it."

The woman's voice resounded from the other side of the altar. She appeared without making any noise, as if by magic. The forest seemed more alive in her presence, and roses suddenly bloomed on the vines behind her.

The boy froze, looking at her with wide eyes. The old man lowered himself to the ground, while the warrior bowed deeply.

"Why are you here?"

The old man straightened and looked at the woman with awe.

"My lady… I bring news of woe."

She regarded him silently, making the old man continue:

"A Supreme Beast is rampaging on the northern borders of our kingdom. The Mountain Gate is no more, and several cities have already been ravaged. We've come to beseech you, as a hero, to defend our lands once more."

The woman's beautiful face remained expressionless.

"Is there no warrior left in the kingdom to defeat a rampaging beast?"

The warrior looked away in shame. The old man, meanwhile, smiled wistfully.

"...There are those who can kill the beast, my lady. However, only you can stop its rampage without spilling blood."

The woman remained silent for a while, then turned away without saying a word and disappeared into the shrine.

A few minutes later, she returned carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows, a leather bracer fastened on her forearm. The old man shifted and looked at her with glee.

"Our ship…"

But she simply shook her head.

"No need."

She picked up a hawk's feather from the altar, looked at it silently, and then threw it into the fire. A moment later, two wings like those of a hawk unfolded from her back, sunlight pouring through the brown feathers.

The woman fastened the quiver to her belt and stretched her wings, preparing to take flight.

Before that, however, she lingered for a few moments.

Taking the grapes from the altar, she offered them to the boy, and then awkwardly patted him on the head.

"Don't let your elders kneel in your stead, boy."

A moment later, her graceful figure soared into the air.

The boy was left on the ground, looking at the sky with wonder in his eyes.

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A mountain chain lay in ruins. Beyond the broken cliffs and fractured land, pillars of smoke were rising into the sky from a devastated city.

And on the plain in front of it…

A colossal boar lay on the ground, dead, a flood of crimson blood flowing from its wounds like a river. Its carcass was like a towering hill, and the woman who stood below it looked like an ant in its shadow.

Her quiver was empty, and her face was grim.

She inhaled deeply, then grimaced, as if appalled by something.

"Poison…"

The woman crouched slightly and leapt high into the air, landing on the dead beast's snout.

She ascended its corpse like one would a mountain, eventually reaching the colossal boar's vast back.

There, hidden by the coarse fur, hundreds of great javelins bristled like a palisade, their metal corroded and covered in rust.

The woman grasped one of the javelins and pulled it out of the dead beast's flesh, then studied it with a frown.

A few moments later, she frowned.

"Imperial steel?"

Her expression darkened.

Turning north, she looked at the crumbled mountains. Where a narrow mountain pass had been, now there was a wide valley. An impregnable gorge had turned into an open road.

A shadow fell on the woman's clear eyes…

And with that, Sunny found himself back in the Ash Castle.

He gasped, then swayed slightly, disoriented for a moment.

'What? What the…'

Which of his questions was this truth supposed to answer? He wanted to know how the world had ended, not how a strange woman had slain a rampaging Supreme Beast!

And more than that…

"Auro?! Auro of the damn Nine?!"

Now that was a blast from the past!

As Sunny spat the name of the young imperial soldier he had killed once, in his First Nightmare, Slayer shifted slightly behind him. Turning around, he looked at her veiled face, then studied her graceful figure.

"That… that was a scene from your past, wasn't it?"

Slayer tilted her head, looking at him expressionlessly.

Sunny stared at his Shadow for a few moments, then looked away.

'Right. She doesn't know what truth was revealed to me, and on top of that, she doesn't even remember her own past."

And even if the truth Ariel's Game had shown him was about Slayer… technically, it was not her past. Because Slayer was not the woman from the vision he had been shown, but a Shadow Creature born from the woman's shadow instead, long after the woman died.

Still…

There must have been a reason why Ariel's Vision had given him this truth, and not any other.

The scene must have been important, somehow.

As important as two daemons meeting in the middle of the Doom War.

…If it was, however, Sunny had no idea why.

He took a few deep breaths, trying to suppress his frustration, then slowly regained his composure.

'No… it's fine.'

There were twelve more Snow Abominations for him to slay, and twelve more truths for him to uncover.

One of those should hold the answer he sought.

Chapter-2337: Actionable Strategy

The sun was rolling toward the horizon, so Sunny and his companions left the dark interior of the Ash Castle and scaled the slopes of the caldera once again. The pillar of smoke rising into the sky gave birth to billowing black clouds, and flakes of ash were falling down like snow.

The last volcano was surrounded by snow-covered mountains from all sides, and their pristine white peaks loomed oppressively in the distance.

While Kai and Slayer were preparing for battle, Sunny assessed his army.

He had a Saint, a Transcendent Shadow, and two dozen Supreme shades at his disposal. Each individual Obsidian Wasp was powerful and lethal, but strangely enough, Kai and Slayer — the Ash Beasts — were much more deadly than the shades despite their inferior Rank.

And, of course, there was Sunny himself — the Ash Tyrant.

With a sigh, Sunny drew the map of Ariel's Game in the ash again and studied it with a somber expression.

Kai fastened the black quiver to the sash of his ivory armor and looked at him questioningly.

"You seem... troubled?"

Sunny nodded slowly.

"I am, a little. By now, we know a lot about how this realm works — enough to plan a strategy, at least. However, there are still two

questions that are left unanswered. One of them is somewhat important, but the other one is vital."

He pointed to the map.

"First of all, while we have some idea what the Castles and the Shrines do, the special square at the very heart of the board is still a mystery. Much more importantly, though, we don't know if there is a difference between how figures move. For example, we don't know if some figures can move diagonally between the mountains or cross several peaks in one move."

He sighed.

"Well, if they can, there is no point in making strategies. We will be surrounded in no time, no matter what we try to do… then, it will just be a fight to the death."

He looked at the map and narrowed his eyes.

"If we assume that all figures can only move one square at a time, though… then, it is quite obvious what we must do."

On the grid in front of him, the Snow Tyrant was guarded in the northern Castle by a Snow Demon and two Beasts. One Snow Devil was guarding the center of the board, while the second one was guarding the Eastern Shrine with two Monsters. Three Snow Beasts surrounded the Ash Castle, while the last Snow Demon was alone in the south-western corner.

Which meant that the Western Shrine was left unguarded.

Sunny pointed to it.

"We need to reach that square, entrench ourselves, and kill as many enemies there as we can. The problem, of course, is that the Snow Demon in the left corner can get to it much faster… oh, and that we are surrounded by Snow Beasts from all sides."

He smiled darkly.

"So, we need to kill one of them before they attack us from all sides

come dawn."

He would have preferred to spare all three Snow Beasts to kill them later at the Shrine, but the situation left him with little choice. He had to break the blockade around the Ash Castle tonight, before the snow worm and the clockwork giant received a chance to attack the Ash Castle from west and east simultaneously.

So, the only real choice Sunny had was which of the three Snow Beasts to attack.

Naturally, finishing off the Ice Hive was the easiest choice... which was not to say that it would be easy. That said, he would rather deal with one of the Cursed Ones first.

Sadly, he could not.

Launching an attack on the mountain conquered by the ghastly worm would bring him too close to the Snow Demon in the far west, while challenging the fearsome giant would take him further away from the Western Shrine, well on his way to being caught by the group of Snow figures guarding the Eastern Shrine.

So, only one choice remained.

Sunny glanced at the two Shrines, suddenly remembering the four words carved into each side of the jade board.

Snow, Ash, Fear, Truth.

Suddenly, he realized that the rune of Ash was carved just below the square where, as he knew now, the Ash Castle stood. The rune of Snow was directly opposite, under the square where the Snow Castle stood.

The Shrine that the Snow Demon guarded… was it the Shrine of Fear, then?

Which meant that the Shrine Sunny wanted to occupy was the Shrine of Truth.

He smiled.

'How fitting.'

His hair was disheveled, so he tied it back with a band made of shadows. Then, Sunny moved his shoulders, stretching them before the battle.

"Prepare yourselves. We are going to wipe out the Ice Hive from existence today."

While somewhat unfortunate, it was not a bad choice. That way, at least, Sunny would gather more shades before facing the truly powerful Snow Abominations further down the line.

Just as he spoke those words, the sun finally touched the distant horizon. Its radiance turned vibrant red, painting the sea of clouds with a thousand shades of scarlet, crimson, and carmine.

It was as if the lonesome mountains were rising from a sea of blood.

The volcano quaked. Then, it roared, and the pillar of smoke rising from its depths swelled, growing wider and more voluminous. The clouds of ash above them boiled.

A powerful wind blew from the south, scattering the ash and carrying it north, west, and east. Just as it had happened with the snow, the plumes of ash reached across the glowing red abyss of sunlit clouds, absorbing the intense radiance of the eventide.

Soon enough, the tendrils of ash solidified into colossal obsidian bridges, which glowed with the reflected light of the setting sun as if imbued with burning embers.

It was a pretty sight.

Sunny inhaled deeply, then commanded his troops forward.

"...Attack."

Chapter-2338: Dire Penalty

Sunny jumped down to the surface of the obsidian bridge, testing it carefully. The bridge was hundreds of meters across and dozens of kilometers long, arching gracefully above the glowing sea of crimson clouds. It was not monolithic, but rather an airy and ethereal structure of chaotically interwoven streams of obsidian that looked far more fragile and delicate than it was supposed to be.

In truth, Sunny suspected that even if he had access to his full titanic strength, he would not be able to put a dent in the obsidian bridge.

So, he did not have to worry about it collapsing beneath him.

Turning into a shadow, he glided across the smooth obsidian with great speed. Sunlight burned in the depths of the volcanic glass like embers, and the winds howled above. Kai and Slayer followed behind, escorted by the insect-like shades.

He could have carried them all to the distant mountain through the shadows, but there was a possibility that they had gotten the rules of Ariel's Game wrong, and that the being dwelling beneath the clouds would react negatively to the Ash Domain advancing. So, Sunny wanted to leave himself a chance to react and retreat in case that happened.

Luckily, nothing of the sort transpired. This was good news for Sunny, since he planned to rely heavily on their ranged advantage when dealing with the Ice Hive.

The mountain was perforated by countless tunnels that formed a complicated network. Besieging the Crystal Wasps in their home would be quite a treacherous affair, so Sunny wanted to lure at least some of them out first.

Kai's new arrow was going to be of great help, in that regard. Since it

could phase through solid matter, he could use it to wound the Snow Abominations while they were hiding in the depths of their ice fortress — enough so to send them into a rage, at least.

Sunny had half-expected that the Crystal Wasps would hurry to the surface themselves, forming a solar array to bombard the attackers with colossal beams of incinerating light while they crossed the bridge, but that did not happen either. The abominations seemed quite comfortable waiting for the enemy in the depths of the Hive, where they had both the terrain and the numerical advantage.

However, Sunny's plan met a different obstacle.

Just a few moments after stepping on the bridge, he suddenly emerged from the shadows and swayed, a strained expression on his face.

"Ah… that feels terrible."

He expected that attacking a square of the Snow Domain would weaken him, just like the Crystal Wasps had been weakened when attacking the Ash Castle. However, he did not know just how severe the penalty would be.

Sunny felt sapped of his vitality, frail and feeble, as if he had aged several decades in a single moment. His body was weakened, while his soul was frozen, the essence circulating sluggishly as the rate at which it was replenished fell drastically.

Behind him, Kai staggered in the air, while Slayer came to an abrupt halt and slid across the obsidian surface, keeping her balance with the grace of a dancer. Her eyes remain cold and menacing, but her brow curved in a subtle scowl.

Even the Obsidian Wasps seemed to slow down.

Sunny looked back, at the ashen slopes of the fuming volcano, wondering if the weakening hex would be removed if they returned. Kai and Slayer had already shown that they can hit targets on the distant mountain from the edge of the caldera, after all… so, crawling back to start a purely ranged assault was a possibility.

It was not a very good decision, though, because it would take Kai many hours to significantly reduce the number of enemies from that far, let alone to eradicate the Ice Hive completely — if that was even possible.

And the time they had to conquer the snowy peak would run out as soon as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

Sunny frowned.

They were close to the middle of the obsidian bridge, just about to escape from under the clouds of ash and see a clear sky. Looking at Kai, he said evenly:

"Kai, try wounding one of them from here."

The charming archer landed on the glowing obsidian and retrieved the enchanted arrow from his quiver. The crystal arrowhead glistened as he nocked it on the string, and then…

Nothing happened.

Kai struggled with his bow for a few moments, muttering something to himself, then lowered it with a complicated expression and looked at Sunny.

"I… can't."

He grimaced.

"I can't draw my bow. It's too heavy."

Sunny blinked a few times.

'Curse it all.'

So that was what it meant to be suppressed by the Snow Domain, which spanned forty-eight out of forty-nine peaks of Ariel's Game.

Or rather, that was what it meant to attack a mountain surrounded by the Snow Domain from all sides except for one.

Sunny sighed, knowing that his plan had gone belly up. He could potentially manipulate the black bow to make it easier to draw, but that would not help the situation — any weaker, and Kai would not even be able to scratch the Crystal Wasps, let alone kill them.

Slayer was in a somewhat better position, but she was not going to be of great help either. Both of them were Transcendent, and weakened even further by the Snow Domain, facing scores of Great Beasts in battle would be a tall task for them.

'I might have underestimated how important the role of the Domains is in this game.'

So… what was he supposed to do?

Kai seemed to be thinking the same.

"What do we do, Sunny?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then looked at the distant mountain with a somber expression.

There was only one thing left to do, really.

He smiled coldly.

"...You two make sure that none of them escape."

Kai raised an eyebrow, confused.

"Escape? Escape from what?"

Sunny took a step forward, summoning the helmet of the Jade Mantle.

His low voice sounded even when he spoke.

"...From me."

With that, he suddenly disappeared, taking the Obsidian Wasps with him. Kai and Slayer were left alone on the bridge, bathed in the scarlet radiance of the setting sun.

Almost at the same time, the shadows within the Ice Hive stirred, surging forward, and a fearsome figure encased in an armor of inky-black jade stepped out of them, facing a rattled Crystal Wasp like an omen of death.

Chapter-2339: Invading the Ice Hive

Sunny found himself in a cave made of ice.

His turbulent thoughts settled, giving way to the cold and tranquil state of battle clarity.

There were around fifty Crystal Wasps left in the Hive — each of them a Great Beast. The network of tunnels and caverns was their fortress, while Sunny was weakened as an invader into the Snow Domain. Each abomination was more powerful than he was due to the rules of Ariel's Game... but that was a trifling matter.

After all, Sunny had come this far by facing enemies who were much more powerful than him. Even if he had enjoyed the ultimate privilege of being the strongest monster on the battlefield as of late, the tenacity of a cunning killer was in his blood.

The Crystal Wasps were mere Beasts — Great Beasts, but Beasts nonetheless. They were mindless death machines that only knew the frenzied madness of bloodlust. His intelligence was a deadlier weapon, so he was not too concerned about his diminished power.

Their great numerical advantage was a more pressing threat. Even though the tunnels of the Ice Hive were somewhat narrow, Sunny knew that he could be easily overwhelmed here.

He had his shades, of course, but they would simply be torn to shreds if he unleashed them immediately — after all, there were far fewer of them than there were Crystal Wasps, at the moment, and they were being weakened by the Snow Domain as well.

That said, Sunny was in a far better situation than he had been on the Forgotten Shore. Not because he had become infinitely more

powerful — his enemies had, as well — but because there were more tools at his disposal.

He was going to destroy the Ice Hive by using his mind, his versatility, and his superior skill.

...His shadow sense spread into the depths of the mountain, enveloping every corner of the enormous hive. In a heartbeat, he perceived and fathomed every tunnel, every intersection, and every cavern hidden in the ice.

He also perceived the location of every Crystal Wasp guarding the frozen fortress.

Some were gathered in vast caverns in groups, waiting. Some were patrolling the tunnels alone or in pairs. Some were busy preparing the fortress for the attack. Sunny did not sense any traps, but he did discover a complicated system of crystal chimes that responded to the smallest movement of air, and would therefore notify the Crystal Wasps if an intruder disturbed their dwelling.

Because of it, the Ice Hive was permeated by a delicate, melodious tinkling.

Sunny smiled.

In the next moment, the shadows all across the network of tunnels surged and rose. The shadows did not attempt to wound or kill the Crystal Wasps — instead, they merely turned into solid walls of obsidian, blocking off countless tunnels.

The abominations instantly stirred, moving to destroy the obstructions; however, even with their great power, destroying the solid mass of mystical obsidian was going to take some time… especially because it kept repairing itself.

Sunny did not just block the tunnels randomly. Each obstacle was placed strategically, and for a single purpose — he wanted to isolate the Crystal Wasps from each other.

To kill them one by one.

After all, even though Sunny was disadvantaged in terms of power, he also possessed some advantages. Among them, two stood out the most — his awareness… and his mobility.

'Let's start.'

By then, the Crystal Wasp in front of him — a solitary scout of the Ice Hive — was already lunging forward.

Sunny might not have been faster than a Great Beast supported by the Snow Domain, but he was a warrior. The Crystal Wasp, meanwhile… was nothing more than a pest.

The black odachi was already turning into a long pike. Sunny slammed its butt into the ground and braced it with his leg, turning himself so heavy that the ice beneath his feet started to crack. He channeled his Will into the blade of the pike, commanding it to pierce the enemy, and into its shaft, commanding it to remain whole.

Then, he commanded himself to hold.

The Great Beast was flying at him at stunning speed, so it had no time to stop. Its own momentum impaled the abomination on the pike, the impregnable crystal carapace shattering as the black blade pierced its chest and exited through the crack between the thorax and the abdomen.

Of course, the malevolent Wasp was still alive, straining to push its body along the pike's length to rip Sunny apart.

He strained his muscles, raising his weapon… and the massive Nightmare Creature impaled on it. Then, with a hiss, Sunny thrust the pike upward with all his might and pinned the abomination to the tunnel's ceiling.

Before the Wasp could shatter the shaft of the manifested weapon and free itself, seven black spikes shot from the ground like pillars, obliterating its body and causing the tunnel to collapse.

[You have slain an enemy.]

…Sunny was already someplace else.

Stepping through the shadows, he appeared on the opposite side of the Ice Hive, deep inside the mountain, in a small cave where another solitary Crystal Wasp was digesting the remains of its fallen kin. Those of the abominations who had escaped the previous battle with grievous wounds were mercilessly devoured by the less damaged Beasts to mend their wounds...

The Ice Hive seemed to operate according to the principles of ruthless practicality.

Sunny did not have time to observe how the Crystal Wasps turned their food into crystalline liquid, and how they used that liquid to heal and strengthen themselves — manifesting a sword out of shadows, he severed one of the abomination's legs at the joint and danced away from its retaliation.

The rest was simply a matter of technique and swordsmanship.

Despite the Great Beast's superior size and physical might, Sunny swiftly cripplied it, thus reducing its agility, and then beheaded the creature with a precise strike.

[You have slain…]

'That's two.'

He was gone by the time the corpse of the abomination hit the ground.

'Forty-nine to go.'

Chapter-2340: Conquering Tyrant

Sunny started with the Crystal Wasps who had been caught in his shadow maze alone. The obsidian barriers he had erected were strong, but not as strong as they would have been outside the Snow Domain — the enraged Great Beasts would destroy them sooner rather than later, so he had to act fast.

His hunt was swift and brutal.

Using Shadow Step to instantly move between distant areas of the Ice Hive, he picked the stragglers off one by one. His combat skill and indomitable killing intent were more than enough to slay the fearsome crystal abominations, even if clashing with so many Great Beasts in quick succession was swiftly depleting his stamina.

In a narrow tunnel, Sunny severed a menacing Crystal Wasp in two with a razor-sharp odachi, and then pierced its head through the eye when the upper half of the abomination kept crawling at him in a murderous frenzy.

In an ice cave where drops of water were falling into a vast and clear pool from a forest of crystal stalactites, he kept another Great Beast at a distance with a spear for a few moments, then found an opening and split its abdomen open with a vicious strike. Its head shattered under his boot a second later.

In a passage so narrow that a single Crystal Wasp could barely fit inside, Sunny closed the distance to a frenzied Great Beast, diving past its scythe-like legs, tore its carapace open with the gauntlets of the Jade Mantle, and shattered the delicate flesh beneath with his fists.

The melodious sound of wind chimes was drowned out by the

clangor of battle, roaring thunderclaps, and the loud ringing of shattering crystal.

By the time Sunny was done dealing with the solitary Nightmare Creatures, he was slightly out of breath. The entire slaughter had taken him no more than a couple minutes, and he had never stopped moving, seamlessly stepping between the shadows as if the sequence of brutal clashes was one uninterrupted battle.

'Thirty-seven to go.'

That was how many Crystal Wasps there were left in the Ice Hive. Sadly, things were going to get harder from now on — the rest of them were grouped together, and as he dealt with smaller groups, the larger ones would break through the shadow barriers and fuse.

But that was alright.

Because by killing the solitary abominations, Sunny had made sure that the number of his shades swelled.

It had to swell a little more, though.

'Fourteen more will do.'

Fourteen Great Beasts... such a trifle!

Wincing as if in pain, he assumed the form of the Shadowspawn and dove into the shadows, holding a black odachi in each of his two pairs of hands.

Shooting from the darkness in a large vertical cavern, he jumped onto the wall and ran up its icy length, his claws sinking into the hard ice. Dim, diffused light was streaming from somewhere far above, and the two Crystal Wasps waiting on the wall instantly moved, rushing down to obliterate him.

Because of where the source of light was located, their long shadows reached Sunny before the abominations themselves could. He slashed at their shadows with both of his swords, causing the Wasps to let out ear-piercing screeches and fall down, crashing into the distant floor of the cavern while convulsing in agony — by the time they

recovered enough to move again, he already plummeted down and shattered one with the unbearable weight of his body.

There was a deafening boom, and the floor of the cavern cracked as a cloud of ice particles and crystal shards rose into the air. A split second later, Sunny emerged from the mass of pulverized ice, his two swords lashing out to pierce the vital points of the remaining abomination.

[You have slain…]

He dove into the shadows, carrying the twitching corpse with him. Emerging in a cave where two more Crystal Wasps were furiously attacking an obsidian wall, he tossed the corpse at one of them and attacked the other.

[You have slain...]

And so it went.

'Ah… I'm tired…'

Even at this breakneck speed, Sunny felt nervous that he would not be able to slaughter the entire Hive before the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

What would happen if the Ash Domain's move came to an end before the Snow figure protecting the square was slain?

Considering how hastily the Crystal Wasps retreated from the volcano in the morning… nothing Sunny would want to learn.

Soon enough, he ran out of pairs of abominations to kill. His lungs were burning, and his heart — both of them, since he was still in the Shadowspawn form — were beating wildly. There were a few cracks on the Jade Mantle, and a few hideous cuts on his body.

He did not bleed, of course, but the insidious cold was seemingly seeping under his skin, making him feel even weaker.

"Damn it…"

Sunny let out a low growl.

By then, the obsidian barriers had already fallen, and the remaining Wasps — more than twenty of them — gathered in a vast cavern, ready to rush like a crystal avalanche to find and destroy the intruder.

But Sunny did not make them wait.

Instead, he stepped into the shadows one last time and emerged in the cavern, looking at the two dozen abominations from behind the vizor of his jade helmet.

…It felt quite unnerving, to say the least, to be stared down by a swarm of Great Beasts.

'Who are you to dare stare me down, Beasts... no, forget it. There's no time for that!'

Sunny grinned.

'That should be enough.'

With that, he turned into a shadow.

And from that shadow, a torrent of ash rolled like a billowing cloud, splitting into helical strands to envelop the swarm of Crystal Wasps.

A moment later, the ash solidified into Obsidian Wasps — close to fifty of them, against two dozen Great Beasts.

Two for each abomination left in the Ice Hive.

Sunny assumed a tangible form once more, abandoning the towering body of the Shadowspawn in favor of his own swift and slender body.

His smile was cold and cruel.

"Didn't I say it? Death is inevitable."

His Obsidian Wasps rushed forward, and he lunged at the nearest abomination as well.

…Before too long, the Ice Hive was no more, each of its crystalline inhabitants becoming a soldier in his growing army.

Chapter-2341: Cloud of Ash

The floor of the cavern was littered with fragments of shattered crystal. Sunny had recalled the Obsidian Wasps back into the dark depths of his soul and dismissed his helmet, inhaling the frigid air deeply.

Now that the sounds of the slaughter had ceased, the melodious tinkling of the crystal wind chimes permeated the silence once more.

He exhaled slowly, knowing that the soothing melody would be erased from existence before too long, as well.

'...Not bad, for my first move.'

He had taken one of the Snow figures off the board.

Taking a few steps forward, shards of crystal crunching under his feet, Sunny used the blade of his odachi to sweep some of them away. This was where he had killed the last of the Crystal Wasps, and so…

'There.'

Crouching, he reached down and picked up a jade figurine from beneath the shards. It was the Snow Beast figure — one representing the Ice Hive.

Sunny studied it for a few moments, then hid it inside his armor.

Then, with no more time to waste, he stepped through the shadows and returned to the cave where water was flowing into a deep pool from a forest of crystal stalactites. Manifesting a large cauldron, he hastily filled it with clear water and pulled it into the shadows, appearing on the slopes of the snowy mountain a few moments later.

Kai and Slayer were already waiting for him there, the last rays of the

setting sun painting their silhouettes with fiery shades of scarlet.

Sunny offered them a friendly smile and brought some water to his lips, drinking greedily.

"Ah..."

'I guess it's not poisoned.'

Then, he raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Kai had been staring at him with wide eyes.

The charming archer shook his head slowly.

"N—no, nothing. It's just… they were Great Beasts. All… all fifty of them…"

His gaze could penetrate solid rock, so he must have seen exactly how Sunny had dealt with the Crystal Wasps.

Sunny grinned.

"Were they? An expected result, then. It would be a shame if I couldn't do this much as a Supreme... after all, I killed my first Great Devil as a Sleeper!"

Finally, he found a chance to work this one in!

Kai's eyes trembled.

…And a moment later, the mountain trembled, as well.

Sunny sighed, then looked at his friend languidly.

"I suggest you brace yourself."

Kai frowned.

"Brace myself? For wh…"

Just then, the sun finally disappeared behind the horizon, and the peak of the mountain exploded with a deafening roar. A towering pillar of smoke and ash rose into the sky, expanding into a mushroom cloud.

Sunny remained nonchalant as a great fireball bloomed behind him, and a wave of scorching wind broke against his back.

"For that."

The mountain quaked and trembled, as if convulsing.

Its entire peak was obliterated by the explosion, stone shrapnel and jagged boulders raining from above. A billowing mass of ash was expelled into the sky and spread, obscuring it like a veil of billowing darkness. Great plates of snow were dislodged and slid down, turning into devastating avalanches…

Then, the slope of the mountains split, and a flood of incandescent lava flowed from its shattered peak, evaporating the snow.

Sunny watched the obsidian bridges turn into torrents of ash as he erected a bulwark of shadows higher on the slope, making the lava flow past the narrow stretch of rock where he, Kai, and Slayer stood.

He gestured to the cauldron.

"How about a drink to celebrate our victory?"

Kai gave him a long look, then scooped some water and drank deeply.

Before too long, the snowy mountain was gone, replaced by a fuming volcano. The peak had turned into a vast caldera. The snow melted, revealing weathered rock, and the rock was covered by a layer of falling ash…

The network of tunnels created by the Crystal Wasps had been destroyed entirely. Most of the tunnels collapsed, while those that remained were now filled with cooled magma.

Night fell, submerging the artificial realm of Ariel's Game in

darkness.

If there was one flaw to the newly established volcano, it was that there was no fortress here for them to hide from the falling ash. So, instead, Sunny created a simple house out of manifested shadows, complete with a few items of crude furniture. There was a desk, a few chairs, and a bed. He even manifested a blanket and a couple of pillows.

He did not need to sleep just yet, but Kai could probably use a bit of proper rest. So, Sunny sent the charming archer to bed and sat at the desk, creating more arrows for him. Slayer stayed outside, guarding their makeshift home… even though they had never been as safe as they were here, in Ariel's Game, for as long as the sun was hidden behind the horizon.

'I wonder what they'll do at dawn.'

Sunny had hoped that the Snow Worm and the Clockwork Giant would move to conquer the Ash Castle, but now that he thought about it, that was pointless. After all, the special nature of Castles was that the squares they stood upon never changed color. So, they could not be truly conquered.

That meant that the two Snow Beasts would probably pursue him north.

'Will we have to fight one or both of them to reach the Shrine?'

That would be unfortunate, since Sunny wanted to kill them as a sacrifice to Ariel's Game.

He briefly considered tossing the figure of the Snow Beast in his possession into the vent of the newly created volcano, but decided against it in the end. There was no altar in front of the main vent here, so he would probably not receive a revelation by doing so.

In the morning, the rising sun turned snow into glass bridges again. Sunny, Kai, and Slayer watched the Clockwork Giant walk across one to the Ash Castle, while the Snow Worm crawled back to the mountain where its nest had been, directly west of the newly created

volcano.

Sunny sighed.

They were boxed in, soon to be corralled. The Snow Worm blocked the way west, while moving east would lead them away from the Western Shrine. That only left the northern direction…

But if there, after one move, they would be surrounded by two Snow Beasts from west and south… and a Snow Devil from the north.

He winced.

'What a bother.'

Chapter-2342: Divine Whims

There was a long time to go before sunset, so the three of them were stuck on the newborn volcano for now. Sunny spent about an hour turning the shadow house into a shadow manor, purely for his own amusement. The elegant edifices rose and fell, changing style. Wings were added to the main building; a bell tower rose from the ground, the bell ringing loudly as it was assaulted by the wind.

After a while, there was even a semblance of garden, perched precariously on the steep slope of the volcano. The bushes, the trees, and the flowers were all inky-black and intricate, but devoid of life.

Sunny sat in front of a flower bed full of black roses for a long time, staring at them intently. Eventually, one of the roses slowly changed, its petals swelling with a vibrant red color.

Color was another property of matter, after all. When light shined on an object, some of it was absorbed, and some of it was reflected — the reflected light was what humans perceived as color. Sunny had never attempted to shape the manifested shadows to absorb and reflect light in a specific manner, but nothing really prevented him from trying.

He had successfully turned the shadow rose red after experimenting for a while. Funnily enough, changing the color of a single flower had been more difficult, and strained him more, than building the entire manor.

Both the manor and the rose were destined to be destroyed in no more than a day, when the volcano was conquered by the Snow Domain. Their beauty was fleeting, and would be gone in an instant…

But maybe that was what made art truly precious. Its evanescent nature.

Sunny had never deemed himself an artist, but at that moment, he thought that maybe being able to create something beautiful was not too bad.

He studied the red rose for a few minutes, then shook his head and made it turn black once again.

Black flowers suited his taste better.

Even knowing that his black garden would be swallowed by ice and snow come tomorrow, Sunny still made it permanent — partially in defiance of that inevitability, partially out of a strange hope that it would survive against all odds.

"It's truly remarkable."

Turning his head, Sunny looked at Kai, who had approached him at some point. There was an expression of wonder on the charming archer's face, prompting Sunny to raise an eyebrow.

"What is?"

Kai hesitated for a few moments, then gestured around them.

"This. The trees, the flowers, the manor… just appearing out of nowhere on your whim. They say that Supremacy is like taking a half-step into godhood. It all sounded like mere words to me before, but now… now, I am starting to understand what a demigod is."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"Maybe that's because all the Supremes you've met before were half-devils, at best, instead of half-gods."

He sighed and then rose from the ground, turning away from the black roses.

"What do you think being Supreme means?"

Kai considered his question for a few moments.

"A Supreme is someone who rules. Someone who carries

responsibility for their subjects, and is powerful enough to bear the weight of that responsibility. Someone whose soul is vast enough to encompass the world, thus becoming a Domain… a Sovereign."

Sunny smiled and shook his head.

"No. A Supreme is simply someone who is daring enough to reshape the world according to their whims."

He patted Kai on the shoulder.

"You are bound to become Supreme yourself, one day soon. So, I suggest you start daring."

Kai stared at him blankly for a bit, which made Sunny sigh.

"Stop being afraid of your own power, Kai. Embrace it."

His friend frowned and lingered for a while.

Eventually, he asked:

"Even if it turns me into a monster?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Especially if it turns you into a monster. How else are you going to survive in this monstrous world, let alone change it?"

Inhaling deeply, he headed for the manor. His short moment of rest was over, and he had to get back to weaving.

As Sunny walked away, Kai suddenly asked:

"Is that what you did?"

Sunny halted his steps, smiled wistfully, and then continued walking.

"Of course. Many times over."

Kai remained silent for a bit, then shook his head.

"Well, I disagree. I don't think that becoming a monster is something

to be proud of. So, I refuse."

Sunny grinned.

'Says a guy who killed a dragon, and is now himself a dragon!'

He kept that thought to himself, though. Instead, he gave Kai a thumbs-up.

"What a daring thing to say. Keep it up!"

With that, Sunny disappeared behind the door of the manor, leaving the charming archer alone.

Well… alone, being watched by Slayer.

The murderous shadow was sharpening her swords on a piece of stone — a completely unnecessary thing to do, considering the sublime materials from which they had been crafted — while observing the two of them silently.

There was no particular emotion in her inky-black eyes, but the measured movement of a blade across the surface of the stone slowed down for a moment.

...In the evening, they crossed the obsidian bridge and conquered another mountain in the north. From there, they could see the fourth row of Ariel's Game… and the central square of the board, where a Snow Devil was waiting for them, protecting it.

Sunny had expected to see another mountain… but he could not have been more wrong.

As he, Kai, and Slayer stood on the slope of another newborn volcano, their expressions were a little strange.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"What the hell?"

In front of them, far in the distance, a colossal tree stood where a mountain was supposed to be. Its roots were hidden beneath the sea

of clouds, and its branches seemed to support the sky, spanning many kilometers across.

Kai looked at Sunny, dumbfounded.

"I'm… not seeing things, am I? How can such an enormous tree exist?"

Sunny nodded slowly, unable to look away from the fantastical view.

"No, you're not. And indeed… that is one humongous tree."

He shook his head in disbelief and said, his voice full of wonder:

"I mean, it's almost as large as a single branch of the largest tree I've ever seen…"

Chapter-2343: Game of the World Tree

Kai was so stunned that he did not even react to that last statement. The three of them simply remained still for a while, observing the magnificent sight of the colossal tree.

The bark of the tree was dark, while its branches were bare and shrouded in snow. Its branches were like a frozen nebula, while the tree itself was like the axis of the world, rising above the sea of clouds much higher than even the surrounding mountains. Sunny could not see its roots, but he suspected that it was at least ten times taller than the Soul Devourer had been at its peak.

Of course, it was still infinitely smaller than the inconceivable tree whose stump he had witnessed at the heart of the Burned Forest.

Eventually, Kai exhaled and said slowly:

"It's like I'm looking at a world tree."

Sunny shook his head.

"I've... seen the actual world tree once. It is located north of the Forgotten Shore, and all that remains of it is an unfathomably enormous stump. This one… well, maybe it's a sapling of the world tree."

He studied the tree for a while, then said with a hint of doubt in his voice:

"Perhaps it is. We don't really know what this miniature realm is made of, and if these mountains are even real. But if this tree is indeed real and is a child of the Heart God's world tree, then it might very well be the thing that holds this entire realm together. Ariel

might have used it as the core of his game's world."

There was no evidence to prove his theory, really, but Sunny was inclined to believe it. But even if he was wrong, just to be safe…

"Whatever you do, Kai, don't look inside that tree."

The charming archer raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"If it really is the central element of this world's structure, then it might very well be the source of the being beneath the clouds… or at least connected to it. Who knows what slithers deep inside that enormous trunk? You might see something that your mind can't endure."

Kai shivered.

"Noted."

Sunny studied the tree a bit more, then scratched his head.

"It does make me wonder, though. Currently, it's shrouded in snow. How the hell will it become covered in ash if we conquer it? A tree can't erupt with lava, can it?"

He chuckled.

Would it bloom if it was conquered by the Ash Domain? Or would it literally spew molten rock?

The latter was not impossible. Considering the size of the giant tree, its roots could very well stretch wide and deep enough to reach the mantle of this artificial world, or maybe even its molten core… if it even had those.

In any case, Sunny was more interested in something else.

"There was a Snow Devil guarding the central square on the jade

board. Can you see it?"

Kai looked into the distance.

He remained silent for a while, then hurriedly looked down.

"...Yes. I think so."

Sunny sighed.

"So, what kind of horror is it this time? A bestial monstrosity with rotting flesh? An eerie, creepy wraith? No, don't tell me… it's some kind of insect, isn't it? Damnation! Why does it always have to be insects?"

Kai lingered for a moment, then shook his head.

"No. It… it looks like a human to me."

Sunny frowned.

"A human? No, wait. Is it human, or does it look like a human?"

Kai lingered with the answer.

"I'm not sure. That Devil, he's just sitting there with his legs crossed. But I can't really discern any details, just… I think that he looked back at me, too."

Sunny considered the new information silently.

Devils were sentient, intelligent, and cunning. They also wielded unholy powers, much like Awakened wielded Aspect Abilities. More importantly, this particular Devil was either Great… or Cursed. The former was tolerable, but the latter was truly bad news.

At that moment, Kai suddenly added:

"There is… something strange about that Devil. I am not sure what it is, but I think I saw something behind him, like a string that glistened for a short second. In fact, I had the same feeling when looking at the other Snow Abominations we faced, as well. All of them are a bit

strange."

Sunny gave him a dark look.

"...Hey, I am already on edge, so there's no need to say creepy things to scare me even more, okay?"

The moon was rising above the sea of clouds, and the snow-covered branches of the colossal tree shone in its pale light.

He sighed.

'Damn it.'

"Anyway. Be prepared to fight that thing, whatever it is."

This next dawn was going to be a perilous one for them. The Snow Worm and the Clockwork Giant were still two moves away, but the Snow Devil could attack the newborn volcano in one — meaning that it could attack them in the morning.

As long as it was willing to… commanded to?

Sunny still did not know what level of control the Snow Tyrant had over the other Snow figures. It was in the nature of Nightmare Creatures to attack beings whose souls were devoid of Corruption in a murderous frenzy, but if the Tyrant was in control of these abominations, then it could suppress their demented, overwhelming desire for a while.

After all, Sunny was the Ash Tyrant, and he was accompanied by two Ash Beasts. They had already shown their ability to eliminate Snow figures, so the Snow Tyrant could show reluctance to send its Devil into battle alone.

They would just have to wait and see.

And so, they did.

In the morning, as the sun rose above the horizon and illuminated the sea of clouds with beautiful golden light, ethereal glass bridges connected the volcano to the surrounding mountains once more...

and to the colossal tree, as well.

Behind them, the volcano they had left yesterday was conquered by the Clockwork Giant and was covered by snow once again. To the left, the Snow Worm crawled to a new peak and coiled around it, blocking the way west.

And the Snow Devil…

Remained where he was, not in a hurry to attack.

Sunny cursed quietly.

It was good news that they would not have to fight the Devil today. However, it was also terrible news, because all clues pointed to the fact that the Snow Tyrant was capable not only of controlling the Snow figures, but also of doing it strategically.

He grimaced and looked away from the snow-covered tree, his eyes turning a few shades darker.

"...We are going to kill that hideous worm in the evening. Get ready."

It seemed that he would finally slay his first Cursed Beast.

Chapter-2344: Nature of the Beast

There were a few minutes left before sunset. Sunny, Kai, and Slayer were on the slope of the volcano, waiting for the obsidian bridges to span the vast divide between them and the mountain where the Snow Worm lay in wait.

Sunny was calm, while Slayer was her usual malevolent self. Kai, however, seemed worried.

Watching him count his arrows for the tenth time, Sunny sighed.

"That worm is a Beast. Which means that it is huge, strong — and dumb. Dealing with a dumb beast is not that difficult… however, it is also of the Cursed Rank. Which means that it is a lesser god. I know that you are a specialist in killing dragons, Kai, but have you ever killed a god?"

The charming archer slowly shook his head.

"No. Have you?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Not really. I did kill a dead god once, though."

Kai took a deep breath, prompting Sunny to smile.

"It was a minor god, and the Shadow Realm did most of the job. I only dealt it the last blow."

He paused for a moment, then shrugged.

"I have yet to slay a Cursed Beast, but in normal circumstances, it would not have been too big of a problem. Sadly, I am severely

weakened by the current circumstances. So, we will have to really apply ourselves today. If we don't kill that thing before night comes, we'll probably die."

They did not simply have to kill the Snow Worm — they had to kill it before the sun disappeared behind the horizon. If they failed to slay the Cursed Beast in time, they would have to retreat to the volcano.

And if they did, all three Snow Abominations would attack them come dawn — two Cursed Beasts and a Devil of unknown Rank. Defeat was not guaranteed, but Sunny did not count their chances of repelling all three abominations high.

He smiled.

"I did watch good old Anvil fight a Cursed Tyrant once, though. So, I know a thing or two about fighting gods."

Sunny considered his words for a moment.

"Fighting a god, lesser or otherwise, is different from fighting any other abomination. That is because gods exist outside the boundary of absolute laws that govern all of existence. They are not free from them, but… let's just say that they have more liberty in interpreting how these laws work, as applied to them. What I mean to say is that the existence of deities, from the point of view of us mortals, is inherently irrational."

He shook his head.

"That… is a long way to say that when we engage the Snow Worm, you should not be surprised when weird things start to happen."

Kai chuckled.

"Weird things? Oh, I think I have developed a high tolerance to weirdness… after spending some time with you, I mean. I guess you truly are a demigod, Sunny! In more ways than just one."

Sunny gave him an oblivious look.

"Huh? What do you mean? Me, weird?"

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"...Forget I said anything."

He remained silent for a bit, then spoke again:

"I am curious, though. You and Nephis… you want to become Sacred yourselves, don't you?"

Sunny was a little surprised by the question. He shrugged.

"I am not sure that it is something that we want. Rather, it is a means to an end. It's something that we have to do."

Kai smiled.

"Doesn't that mean that, soon enough, you will become inherently irrational, too? Aren't you afraid?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well. I haven't thought about the issue from that point of view, before."

He hesitated.

"But… yes. I am a bit afraid. Actually, I am very afraid. Of what I will become, and what I won't be anymore."

He remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"But I have some experience with that. Becoming something new and leaving some of myself behind, I mean. I am not sure if I should say this, but… did you know? Actually…"

Sunny looked at Kai somberly.

"...You may not believe it, but I haven't always been this good-looking."

Kai stared at him.

"Uh…"

Sunny gave him a solemn nod.

"Indeed. I know it's hard to believe, but if anyone can, it's you. After all, you can sense when people tell lies."

Kai cleared his throat.

"I see. So… correct me if I'm wrong… but are you saying that you becoming attractive is a change of the same magnitude as someone mortal becoming a god?"

Sunny stared at him with indignation.

"I am definitely not!"

'That bastard!'

But at least Kai wasn't counting his arrows anymore. Instead, he shook his head and laughed quietly.

"For what it's worth, I doubt you'll leave a lot of yourself behind even if you do become a deity, Sunny. I am not sure how to describe it, but… you seem like someone who will always be himself, no matter the circumstances."

Sunny smiled.

Then, he frowned.

"Are you, perchance, implying that I am already so weird that becoming any weirder will be impossible?"

Kai coughed.

"No, of course not! I definitely… was not implying that…"

Sunny grinned.

"Good, good. Because if you had… I was going to take it as a challenge."

Just then, the sun finally touched the horizon, and the volcano they were standing on spat out a billowing cloud of ash.

Soon enough, a bridge of glossy obsidian connected the ashen slope to the distant mountain, glowing in the scarlet radiance of the dying sun.

Sunny smiled.

"Let's hurry. You know what they say… the early bird gets the worm!"

He jumped down to the surface of the bridge, utterly appalled by himself.

'Gods… what the hell did I just say? Did I really say that?'

The early bird gets the worm?!

It seemed that hanging out with Kai so much after being deprived of the charming archer's company for so long was having a negative impact on his sanity. That joke was truly, unforgivably awful, worthy of being spoken by that despicable old fool, Jest.

The last thing Sunny wanted was to resemble Jest in any shape or form.

Groaning inwardly, he rushed forward.

He had to kill a Cursed Beast, and he had to do it quickly.

Chapter-2345: Infinity and Finality

As Sunny ran across the surface of the obsidian bridge, his figure turning into a dark blur, Kai and Slayer drew their bows. A moment later, black arrows streaked across the sea of clouds and fell, piercing the Snow Worm's pale flesh.

Out there on the slopes of the volcano, they were still within the bounds of the Ash Domain. Therefore, they could exert their full power — granted, their power was not great enough to seriously wound a Cursed Beast.

The Snow Worm was so enormous that it was difficult to miss it. At the same time, its body was so vast that their arrows were no different from tiny needles, dealing almost no harm to the abomination.

But that was alright, because Sunny did not need them to harm the Cursed Beast. Instead, they had to play a different, vitally important role in the opening act of the battle — instead of quality, it was the quantity of their attacks that mattered.

They had to sink as many arrows as they could into the Snow Worm, and do it as swiftly as possible.

That was because the arrows they were shooting were quite special — Sunny had crafted them himself, after all.

In the past few days, he had been observing the Snow Worm carefully. He still did not know a lot about the Cursed Beast, but he was certain that it wielded the concept of infinity as a weapon.

Its pale body could grow endlessly, devouring as much space as the Snow Worm wanted. It could become dozens of kilometers long, or

shrink to merely a few hundred meters. Naturally, that also made the Snow Worm nearly indestructible — after all, no matter how much of its gargantuan body Sunny destroyed, the Beast could simply produce more….

And more, and more, and more, until the entire mountain was buried under its pale flesh.

So, there were two ways to kill the bizarre godbeast. One way was to destroy its rotten soul, which Sunny could achieve by focusing on attacking its shadow. The other was to suppress its power, somehow… but of course, Sunny did not have to pick just one strategy.

He could very well implement both, and the arrows were meant to accomplish the latter.

He had been crafting the arrows to subdue the Snow Worm for the last two days, and had made quite a few of them. The enchantment woven into the jagged crystal arrowheads was based on one of the Memories he had crafted for Rain in Godgrave — [In Case of Emergency].

The purpose of that enchantment was to lock something in space, which was supposed to save her in case the veil of clouds above Godgrave unexpectedly broke. Now, Sunny was not too knowledgeable about these matters, but he was pretty sure that the concept of infinity was innately connected to the concept of space.

At least it was in the context of the Snow Worm, which existed as a living being that could potentially occupy an infinite amount of space.

So, if its body was pinned to space by the enchanted arrows Sunny created, its ability to grow endlessly was going to be compromised — either suppressed or at least interfered with.

That was the plan, at least.

Kai and Slayer did not have to aim that hard to hit the gargantuan Cursed Beast, but there was another challenge facing them. They had

to fire off all the Finality Arrows Sunny had provided them swiftly, which put great strain on their bodies — the draw weights of their bows were nothing short of startling, after all.

Sunny would have loved to stay and enjoy the awesome display of extreme athleticism, but he had his own task to accomplish.

While the role of his companions was to debilitate the enemy, he had to actually kill it.

…While not getting killed, of course.

Fighting a Cursed Beast while only having access to one seventh of his power felt like a bad idea. But, at the same time…

It was just a Cursed Beast.

It was just an abomination one Rank above him. So what was there to feel worried about?

As the arrows pierced the Snow Worm's flesh, the abomination moved. The coils of pale flesh that enveloped the mountain shifted, and its enormous head rose above the peak, opening a colossal maw to let out a low, eerie, horrifying wail.

Sunny could not describe it with words, really — it did not resemble any sound that a living being was supposed to be able to produce at all. Rather, it seemed like something that an elemental force would sound like, sending shivers running down his spine.

Before the obliterating wave of sound could fully hit him, tearing his flesh apart, Sunny dove into the shadows and hid in their depths, allowing for the worm's wail to pass above him. But even in the dark embrace of shadows, he felt his very essence tremble, almost coming undone.

'Been a while… since I got hit by a sonic attack… I think…'

His shadow continued to glide across the glistening bridge at great speed.

And just before he reached the snowy mountain, winged figures burst

from it in a veil of ash, spreading like an obsidian swarm.

They were the shades of the Crystal Wasps he and Slayer had slain — almost a hundred of them.

Two more arrows pierced the Snow Worm's flesh, making it convulse and shrink a little.

Sunny rose out of the shadows, and the shadows rose with him, turning into a towering figure encased in a carapace of beautiful black jade. Standing a hundred meters tall, the Shadow Colossus pulled a hundred-meter-long odachi out of the darkness and looked up, at the gargantuan head of the Cursed Beast looming high above him.

The Snow Worm actually dwarfed Sunny and his titanic Shell. The creature's circular maw could swallow him whole.

As the swarm of Obsidian Wasps surrounded the peak of the mountain, Sunny raised his colossal odachi and pointed it at the Cursed Beast.

'I am going to kill you today, vermin.'

The Snow Worm seemed to stare at him for a moment, even if it had no eyes.

And then, its maw plummeted down, obscuring the heavens.

The mountain shuddered.

Chapter-2346: Intricate Control

'Holy… hell…'

The moment the Snow Worm struck, the entire mountain groaned, and the world itself seemed to shudder in agony. Sunny had witnessed truly harrowing power before, but he had never been so close to something so destructive, so devastating. Even if he had not been stripped of his shadows and weakened by the Snow Domain, he would have been utterly obliterated by this one strike…

But of course, only if he was foolish enough to get struck.

Not even trying to dodge the gargantuan maw of the Cursed Beast, Sunny simply pulled his entire titanic Shell into the shadows, stepping through them to bring down his odachi on the pale flesh of the Snow Worm on the other side of the mountain.

The hundred-meter-long blade cut deep, but even its great length was not enough to sever the abomination in two.

In the next moment, the body of the Snow Worm moved, slamming into Sunny with terrifying force and throwing him back.

'Crap.'

The deep wound he had dealt the Cursed Beast was already gone, replaced by more pale flesh. The snow under Sunny's feet, meanwhile, rippled strangely…

He leaped back, and a split second later, the snow collapsed, falling into the colossal maw that appeared beneath.

The Snow Worm's head shot from below, and then, it was as if a pale wall rose in front of Sunny, reaching toward the sky.

That was the neck of the gargantuan abomination, who had pierced a tunnel through the mountain and tried to swallow Sunny by appearing right beneath him.

Not wasting any time, Sunny rushed forward and plunged his odachi into the pale flesh, using the creature's own momentum to deliver it a long, gruesome cut.

Almost at the same time, two more arrows pierced the flesh of the Cursed Beast.

And then, two more.

Its gargantuan body seemed to shrink a little… or did it only seem that way?

'Argh!'

Two walls of pale flesh were rushing at Sunny from higher up the slope and lower down the slope — they were the coils of the Snow Worm, who was twisting its body to crush the enemy.

'Not… so fast…'

Sunny barely managed to step through the shadows in time. His Shell was made from them, but it was too heavy, too massive — it took him far longer to dive into the shadows than when he was in human form, which could do the same almost instantaneously.

Still, he escaped with his life.

As the head of the Snow Worm turned in the frigid air and rushed down once more, the Obsidian Wasps dove from the sky to attack the gargantuan abomination.

Scores of Supreme shades were a deadly threat to almost any creature, but they were too vulnerable in front of a Cursed Beast. After all, shades did not possess the Will, and worse than that, they were weakened by the Snow Domain. So they could be easily crushed and sent back into Sunny's soul if he used them recklessly.

Luckily, there was one silver lining to how heavily suppressed he was

here, in Ariel's Game.

Sunny had gone about becoming Supreme in a somewhat backward fashion. By the time he learned how to manifest his Domain, it was already vast and powerful, built out of tens of thousands of shades. Faced with their overwhelming number, he had always struggled to control his Shadow Legion — control it with any level of precision, at least.

But here, Sunny was devoid of his vast army. Instead, he could only command a relatively small number of shades that had been earned inside the Game.

That allowed him to command each one intricately.

He had been training himself to control the Obsidian Wasps precisely for the past few days, ever since earning the first one. Handling a hundred shades was far easier than thousands, especially since his mind was free of having to control his other incarnations and keep an eye on the members of the Shadow Clan.

His mind had plenty of unused capacity for the first time in years, so his efforts to learn how to control his shades better fell into fertile soil.

At first, Sunny simply concentrated on having the Obsidian Wasps move in different directions. Then, he made each of them follow an elaborate path. After mastering simple maneuvers, he moved on to practicing more intricate and complicated tasks, eventually arriving at simulated battles between different groups of shades.

By now, the Obsidian Wasps did not exactly feel like extensions of his own body… but he felt confident in making each of them do precisely what he wanted.

That expanded his strategic repertoire greatly, of course.

Right now, he had to give his shades an opportunity to attack the Snow Worm without being destroyed by it.

So… he aimed them precisely at the areas on its enormous body where its tough hide had been cut by his towering odachi.

The Obsidian Wasps plummeted from the sky, their glasslike wings burning with a crimson glow in the light of the setting sun, and crawled into the Snow Worm's open wounds.

Hidden within its voluminous body, where they could not be crushed and devoured by the Cursed Beast, they bit into its flesh, burying themselves deeper and deeper into it as their legs and mandibles cut and shredded the abomination's muscles.

The Snow Worm was gargantuan, but its size could be used as a weapon against it. For now, no more than a dozen shades had managed to crawl into its wounds… but there were going to be more wounds, and more Obsidian Wasps finding their way into the creature's body.

The arrows shot by Kai and Slayer, meanwhile, were constricting the Snow Worm's ability to expand itself more and more.

'It's working.'

As the Cursed Beast's head fell from the sky on Sunny, its shadow covered him. Turning his odachi downward, he plunged it into the abomination's shadow, then collapsed into it to flee the horrifying maw at the last possible second.

His strike dealt some damage to the creature's vast, corrupted soul — not enough to threaten its life, but enough to be felt.

The Snow Worm's flesh rippled in agony.

'I think I can kill it.'

The only question was…

Would Sunny be able to kill the damned monstrosity in time?

The sun was setting, and the clock was ticking. If he was not fast enough…

The one being killed would be him.

Chapter-2347: Curse of Abundance

Sunny played hide and seek with the Snow Worm by jumping between shadows while the mountain was falling apart around them. The creature's gargantuan size made it difficult for him to destroy its body... but it also made it difficult for the creature to destroy him.

The pale, segmented coils of the Snow Worm were wrapped around the entire mountain many times over, expanding and constricting as they moved at great speed and slowly ground the mountain to dust — because of their sheer mass and number, the Cursed Beast was its own obstacle when hunting down an adversary as mobile as Sunny.

The Snow Worm twisted its coils unpredictably to catch and crush Sunny between them — when two walls of pale flesh collided, violent shockwaves sent ripples across the sea of clouds, and the entire world seemed to shake. At the same time, its maw was pursuing Sunny, easily digging tunnels through the mountain or soaring into the sky to plummet down moments later like a ghastly meteor.

These impacts were even more earth-shattering.

Sunny was being attacked from all sides, from below, from above… and yet, despite the unfathomable might of the Cursed Beast, he remained mostly unscathed. He was simply too fast and elusive to be caught, moving from one spot to another almost instantly to dodge the terrifying blows.

That was why pure might was useless unless it was supported by a keen mind, skill, or at least agility. The Snow Worm was undoubtedly a creature of harrowing power, but without proper means to channel that power, all it could achieve was thrash wildly and slowly take the mountain apart in its furious, fruitless pursuit of the nimble enemy.

Then again, as the battle continued, Sunny got the impression that pure, focused lethality was not exactly the Snow Worm's strong suit. Rather, it seemed like a creature who subjugated its prey through its sheer… abundance.

The Snow Worm was too enormous, too voluminous, too inexhaustible. Its infinite body allowed it to weather an infinite number of attacks, only for more pale flesh to burst forward, burying the enemy under its endless mass. So, it could simply endure endlessly, until the enemy was exhausted, tired, and spent.

In this case, the Snow Worm simply needed to endure until nightfall.

It was a single-minded and patient creature. And yet, it was exactly its single-mindedness that made the Snow Worm so terrifying… its extreme mastery of a single power, of a single concept — used both for attack and defense — made it almost inevitable.

…As the Sovereign of Death, Sunny took offense to that.

After all, nothing was supposed to be more inevitable than death.

'If only my legion was here…'

Growling, he fled from the Snow Worm while shredding its flesh with his great blade. Sunny did not discriminate between attacking the body of the Cursed Beast and its shadow, dealing both physical and soul damage to it.

The soul of the Snow Worm was as vast and seemingly endless as its flesh, hiding an infinite amount of vile darkness. When souls received a certain amount of damage, they collapsed and crumbled — except for Sunny's own tenacious soul, which was reinforced by Soul Weave and therefore had no such threshold.

And yet, he felt that the soul of the Snow Worm was too enormous, too ancient, and too deep to be destroyed that way — at least while he was devoid of his shadows and weakened by the Snow Domain.

Perhaps that was what the souls of all deities were like, or perhaps the soul of this corrupted deity in particular was especially abundant. In any case, destroying it was not something that could be

accomplished easily.

Fortunately, Sunny was nothing if not resourceful. Even if dealing a sufficient amount of soul damage was not feasible, he had other means of destroying a soul.

After all, he wielded the power of shadows… the power of death. Just as Nephis had mentioned, each Will was unique, and his was all about killing intent — it was the will to see living beings die. That was both his natural affinity and a skill he had developed by wielding Serpent, the Slaying Blade.

In other words, his Will was more effective and efficient than it was supposed to be when implemented for the purpose of killing. And while the Snow Worm was a being of a higher Rank than Sunny, its Will was not as sophisticated as his.

Sunny understood it as he was desperately fighting the appalling creature. Yes, the Snow Worm was more powerful than him, and its Will was far more dreadful. However, just like a mindless beast could not fathom a combat technique, the gargantuan abomination could not wield its Will with focused intent either.

The Will of the Snow Worm was not much different from the elemental and largely directionless Will of the millipede swarm. And so, Sunny actually had a clear advantage over the profane deity.

Therefore, he could infuse each of his soul attacks with the power of Death — with the focused will to see the enemy die — and that will slowly accumulated, poisoning the soul of the Snow Worm. The quantity of damage he dealt to the enemy's soul might not have been sufficient, but its insidious quality was a completely separate issue.

Even if each cut dealt to the shadow of the Cursed Beast was insignificant due to how vast it was, all of that vastness was poisoned by the Death Will regardless of its nearly endless nature. As soon as Sunny expressed enough will to kill the Snow Worm to overcome its will to live, the creature was going to die.

Which was not to say that he would be able to achieve that before the sun disappeared beyond the horizon...

However, that was only half of Sunny's strategy.

The other half was far simpler — he simply wanted to rip, shred, and devastate the Snow Worm's gargantuan body.

That, too, was a way to kill the enormous Cursed Beast.

Chapter-2348: Death Will

Every cut Sunny dealt to the Snow Worm's voluminous body served a purpose, and that purpose was to allow more Obsidian Wasps to crawl inside it.

By now, almost all of them had found their way into the Cursed Beast. They were slithering there, wreaking havoc and mangling tissue while burrowing deeper and deeper. Even if the wounds Sunny dealt to the gargantuan abomination were relatively insignificant, being mangled and devoured by a hundred Supreme shades from the inside was not.

And yet, the Snow Worm endured the harrowing amount of damage being dealt to it almost effortlessly, demonstrating the vast divide between the Supreme and the Sacred — or rather, Cursed — Ranks.

More than that, even buried deep within its flesh, the Obsidian Wasps were not entirely safe. In fact, many of them had already been destroyed.

Some were simply crushed by the unfathomably powerful muscles of the Cursed Beast. Some had accidentally found their way into its digestive system and were either ground to dust or dissolved entirely. Some met their end in ways that Sunny could not even describe, let alone understand, while some were destroyed in more bizarre ways.

Since the Snow Worm wielded the concept of infinity as its weapon and could expand or shrink its body at will, some Obsidian Wasps were simply torn asunder when the point in space they had occupied suddenly expanded. Others were crushed into infinitely small balls of obsidian when the space they had been occupying shrank.

Of course, none of them were actually destroyed — rather, they were returned to the dark expanse of Sunny's soul. But they were eliminated from this fateful battle, which was ostensibly the same.

'Gods… just how indestructible is that thing?'

The mountain was full of holes by now, groaning precariously, which made it difficult for Sunny to find sure footing as he kept escaping the Cursed Beast's terrible attacks.

The Snow Worm showed no outward signs of being seriously harmed by the swarm of Obisidian Wasps, for now…

Which was not to say that it was unharmed.

In fact, Sunny could sense the cadence of the battle slowly changing.

He felt a bit of vicious joy as he realized that his preparations had not been for naught, and that his strategy was working.

Just as he had planned, he was going to defeat this overwhelmingly powerful enemy by using his advantages — his intelligence, cunning, and skill.

By then, Kai and Slayer had sunk all of the Finality Arrows he had crafted into the Worm's flesh. The enchantments Sunny had so laboriously created were locking various segments of its body in space, making it more difficult for the creature to exercise its infinite power.

At the same time, the Obsidian Wasps were ravaging the Snow Worm's insides, while Sunny was poisoning its soul with the power of his deathly will. Kai and Slayer, meanwhile, switched to purely destructive arrows, helping him wound the Cursed Beast as much as they could.

Their Transcendent wills were added to his Supreme killing intent, tipping the scales.

As Sunny poisoned the soul of the Snow Worm more and more, suffocating the very spark that kept it alive, the creature weakened. The weaker it became, the less it could resist the binding power of enchantments constricting its power. And the more constricted its power was, the more physical harm the Obsidian Wasps could deal it.

Which, in turn, made its life force weaken more.

It was a virtuous cycle… a wicked cycle?

It was a cycle that would bring this gargantuan, mindless, corrupted deity to death.

'Come on, you scum… die faster!'

Sunny's Shell, too, was slowly coming undone. Even if he managed to avoid being struck by the Snow Worm directly, the damage dealt to the Shadow Colossus through simply being in the epicenter of unimaginable destruction was mounting.

Still, he persisted.

Because he could sense it — slowly but surely, the enormous body of the Snow Worm was shrinking. Instead of infinitely growing, it was gradually reducing in size.

He could not see the result due to the sheer scale of the Snow Worm, but he could sense it through the shadows. Already, there were fewer coils surrounding the mountain…

And as the battle continued, the rate at which the Snow Worm was shrinking only accelerated.

By the time Kai had run out of arrows, Sunny could already see its tail. The maw of the creature, too, had diminished in size — it could still swallow Sunny in one bite, but at least not without doing some chewing first.

As he stepped through the shadows and rolled on the heavily damaged, perforated slope of the mountain, a new shadow suddenly joined the fray.

'What… is this maniac doing?'

A haunting sound that resembled a song suddenly permeated the sky, and a sonic wave struck the head of the Cursed Beast, shredding some of its flesh and changing its direction slightly.

A beautiful dragon plummeted from above, landing on the Cursed Beast's back and striking at it with its long, sharp claws. At the same

time, Kai seemed to have spoken something — the Snow Worm largely ignored his command… but not entirely.

Sunny almost missed a graceful figure that shot an arrow into an open wound of the Cursed Beast from the dragon's back. Slayer wanted to kill the weakened deity, as well.

The sun had already fallen halfway behind the horizon.

'We need to hurry.'

After that, the demise of the Snow Worm was hastened.

The damage dealt to its soul and body had accumulated, and its ability to command infinity grew unstable. It shrank its body more and more, crushing the Obsidian Wasps within… but it was already too late.

Soon enough, the Cursed Beast could barely wrap itself around the mountain. Then, its maw became too narrow to swallow the Shadow Colossus — that, ironically enough, made it more dangerous, since it could maneuver much better for a short while. So, Sunny abandoned his Shell and continued the battle as a human.

Before too long, the Snow Worm shrank to a truly pitiful size — no more than a kilometer from head to tail.

Then, it became even smaller, similar in size to Soul Serpent.

…And then, finally, Sunny exhaled tiredly as he leaned on his odachi, looking down at a pale maggot that was wriggling in the mud.

That tiny maggot was the formerly proud Cursed Beast.

Sunny looked at it darkly, his eyes hidden in the deep shadows of the falling dusk.

How could something so great become so pathetic?

"Was that… how the gods died?"

His tone was strangely forlorn.

'Maybe... maybe I'll learn before ending this game.'

With that, Sunny brought his foot down, crushing the tiny maggot under his armored boot.

There was a moment of silence, and then, he heard the familiar words…

[You have slain an enemy.]

Sunny sighed with relief as the last vestige of the sun disappeared from view.

He had killed his first Cursed One today.

Chapter-2349: One Less Pawn

'So… a deity only accounts for this much, in the end.'

Looking down, Sunny did not feel too triumphant. Rather, he was troubled.

Killing a Cursed Beast sounded like a startling accomplishment… and it was, in a sense. However, as a Supreme Titan, that was what he was supposed to be capable of. The true challenge would come when he had to face Cursed Demons, Devils, and Tyrants — the abominable deities who were just as intelligent and cunning as he was, if not more.

And then there were beings as harrowing as Cursed Terrors and Titans. Like the Vile Thieving Bird, who had stolen his very fate from him.

Sunny did not expect easy victories once he graduated to battling those creatures.

Just as he thought about it, a chill ran down his spine. Feeling a cold gaze settle on him, Sunny turned around and looked in the direction of the Axis Tree. He could not see the Devil resting on one of its branches, but knew that he was being watched.

"I guess we had an audience."

Much worse was the realization of just how vast the divide between Great and Cursed beings was. Every Rank was progressively more powerful, and the gaps between them grew exponentially...

And if the Cursed Ones were already this overwhelming, then just how terrible would the Unholy Ones be?

Smiling darkly, Sunny took a step back and crouched, digging in the

squashed remains of the Snow Worm with a disgusted grimace on his face.

Just then, Kai landed near him in a gust of wind, having already reverted to his human form. Slayer was not far behind, either, walking over from higher up the ruined slope.

The latter was grim and calm, like she always was, but the former seemed stunned.

"We… did we just kill a Cursed Beast?"

Sunny hummed nonchalantly.

"Indeed we did."

With that, he stood up and raised a hand, glancing at a tiny gem held between his fingers. It shone beautifully in the twilight of dusk, its radiant depths strangely mesmerizing.

His expression, however, was strange.

"Would you look at that, Kai? This is the first Sacred soul shard I have ever gotten my hands on. But… why is it so tiny?!"

No, really. Sunny felt cheated!

Kai coughed.

"That… I don't think that the size of a soul shard matters, Sunny."

Sunny pursed his lips, then sighed and hid the radiant gem in his armor.

"I guess. That said, buddy, I think you should turn back into a dragon."

Kai blinked a couple of times, then activated his Transcendent Ability once more. Sunny hurried Slayer, and once both of them jumped onto the dragon's back, shouted for Kai to fly up.

A few moments after Kai rose into the air, the eruption started. This

one was far more violent than the previous ones due to how severely damaged by the Snow Worm the mountain had been. It practically fell apart and then rose again, its slopes formed by the cooled lava.

A new volcano stood in place of the collapsed mountain in no time, just as tall and seemingly indestructible as the mountain had been.

Once the three of them landed, Sunny went about erecting a new shadow manor. He shook his head while building it, somewhat shocked.

"That Ariel was really something, wasn't he? Who just goes around making mountains out of thin air? Unbelievable, truly mind-boggling. That's a real daemon for you!"

Kai was observing him with a nonplussed expression. Hearing that, the charming archer shifted his gaze to the opulent manor that was rising from the darkness, as if summoned by magic.

"Yeah… unbelievable…"

This time, Sunny went for a modern style with panoramic windows that opened to the beautiful sight of the starlit sea of clouds. Making manifested shadows transparent was much easier than imbuing them with color, so he went a bit crazy with the glassworks.

Of course, an actual architect or a designer would shed tears at his clumsy attempts to build something, but it was more than enough for a temporary shelter that would be destroyed in a day or two.

Once inside, Sunny rested on a sofa and sighed. He did not quite get its properties right, so the sofa felt both too hard and too soft at the same time. It was these little details that were the hardest to master — shaping the facade of a building was relatively easy, unless he wanted to adorn it with decorative elements, but making the interior feel real was very difficult.

He was exhausted, both physically and mentally. Kai seemed utterly spent, too. After dismissing the outer layers of his armor, the charming archer lowered himself into an armchair and closed his eyes.

Sunny took out the Sacred soul shard and studied it some more, enjoying the beautiful glow.

"Do you know why death was created, Kai?"

Kai looked at him in confusion.

"Death… was created?"

Sunny smiled.

"Of course. There was a time when death did not exist… well, actually, time did not exist back then either. Everything we know as the axiomatic laws of existence was actually created at some point by the gods to contain the Void. The Void was endless and everlasting, after all, so they needed to create some form of finality to cage it. It just struck me as funny that our battle against the Snow Worm was a bit similar to that. A struggle between infinity and finality."

He remained silent for a while, then added:

"Anyway, it was Shadow God who created Death, and nobody — not even the gods — liked him very much because of that. Death was initially a weapon against the Void and the eternal beings that dwelled in it. Even now, death dutifully destroys the Corruption, which is caused by the malignant influence of the Void. That is why we can kill a Cursed abomination and retrieve a Sacred soul shard from its corpse."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"Oh. I… I never thought about that, actually. Now that I do, it does seem peculiar."

Sunny threw the soul shard into the air and caught it.

"But really, if you think about it, death doesn't really exist. Or rather, death is not what people think it is."

Kai raised an eyebrow, confused.

Sunny chuckled.

"People think of death like it is the end, but actually, it is merely a transformation. Shadow God swallowed everything that died and… digested it, I guess, within himself. Ground it all into pure essence, then released it back into the world. He is gone now, but the laws he established still persist. So no one ever really disappears. They just… become something new."

Kai smiled faintly.

"That is a soothing thought, I guess."

Sunny let out a quiet laugh.

"Yes, but I've been thinking… what does that make me? After all, I am somewhat of a thief. The things I kill never reach the Shadow Realm. Instead, they simply remain in my soul forever."

He scratched the back of his head.

"Maybe I can learn how to digest them, too. But if there is a way to do that, I have not learned it yet."

Kai let out a long sigh, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes again.

"So, you want to learn how to digest dead beings. After swallowing them. I see. Any particular reason why?"

Sunny fell into deep thought and remained silent for a while.

Then, his eyes gleamed.

"Come to think of it, it is all because of that dastardly worm. I mean, that thing was huge, right? So I was really hoping to eat some worm meat today. But it just had to go and turn tiny in the end! No meat for us, damn it…"

Hearing another deep sigh, he frowned and looked at Kai with reproach.

"What? Aren't you hungry? No way. Even if you're not hungry, I am!"

There was no answer.

Chapter-2350: Igneous Rock

In the morning, Sunny observed the movements of the Snow figures tensely. The Clockwork Giant was still in pursuit, occupying the volcano they had just left. The Snow Devil, meanwhile… remained where it had been, choosing not to abandon the Axis Tree.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

At this point, his position on the board was still precarious. He needed three moves to reach the Shrine of Truth — and so did the Snow Devil. Considering that it had the initiative, though, the guardian of the Axis Tree would have arrived there first if it wanted to.

Now that it had skipped a move, though, Sunny had the initiative and would reach the Shrine sooner.

It was a bit unnerving, really, because he could not help but question the behavior of the enemy.

Why had the Snow Devil remained passive? Was it because staying on the Axis Tree gave the Snow Domain some kind of advantage, or was it simply because the Snow Tyrant wanted to surround the Shrine with more figures before mounting a three-pronged attack to crush Sunny in one fell swoop?

'We'll see when we get there.'

There was something else for him to consider, as well. There were eight more Snow figures on the board that Sunny could not see. None of them had appeared, yet, and he suspected that they had been staying in their initial positions until now.

But Sunny had a sinking suspicion that all of them had departed from their squares this morning, moving in the direction of the Shrine of

Truth.

There was a very simple reason why he believed that. Before, the Snow Tyrant had no way to guess where Sunny was going — after all, he had gone directly north after abandoning the Ash Castle, never changing direction.

But then, Sunny turned west and killed the Snow Worm. That indicated his desire to conquer the Shrine of Truth, and gave the enemy an understanding of his plans — and, therefore, the ability to build an appropriate strategy.

'How troublesome.'

It would take the group of Snow figures in the north from four to six moves to reach the Shrine of Truth. The group occupying the Shrine of Fear, meanwhile, would need from six to seven moves to get there.

There was the Snow Demon from the left corner to worry about, too, who could already be in the Shrine of Truth or en route to it. But Sunny was not too worried about a solitary figure.

In any case, the coast was clear — for now, at least.

'We should enjoy these days of peace.'

Once they reached the Shrine, it would most likely be one dreadful battle after another. So, it was good that Sunny had a few days to prepare.

Most of the Obsidian Wasps had been destroyed in the battle against the Snow Worm. It was going to take some time for them to repair themselves… additionally, he could dedicate this time to weaving.

He could create more arrows for Kai and improve his bow. More importantly, there was the Sacred soul shard in his possession now. Using it, he could create something truly special.

But currently, Sunny was worried about something else.

Looking away from the Axis Tree, he stared at Kai and nudged him on the shoulder.

"Well? Did you find it?"

Kai coughed awkwardly.

"Well… it's a big mountain, Sunny. Give me more time."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"What do you mean, it's a big mountain? You can see through ash! You can see through rock! How hard can it be to find a piece of flawless white jade in this pile of obsidian and solidified magma?"

Kai let out an exasperated sigh.

"It would be less difficult if I could concentrate for a few moments, Sunny…"

Sunny scoffed.

"Oh! I see you know how to talk back now. Hey. Look at Slayer — she has never talked back to me once."

Slayer gave him a look, her black eyes full of such chilling malice that he almost flinched.

"...I mean, she does drink my blood and tries to kill me every week. But at least she does it silently!"

The thing Sunny wanted Kai to find was, of course, the figure of the Snow Beast he was supposed to receive for killing the gargantuan worm. He had been so engrossed in appreciating the aesthetic beauty of the Sacred soul shard — and not at all overcome by greed! — that he had forgotten about it entirely at the moment.

And then, the entire mountain fell apart.

Considering that they had to move on from this newborn volcano by evening, Sunny felt quite pressed to find the jade figurine. After all, it was invaluable.

He was already starting to grow nervous when Kai finally smiled.

"There, I see it."

He pointed in the vague direction where the Snow Worm had died.

"It's right there, about five hundred meters underground, stuck in igneous rock."

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

"Good, good."

Then, he fell silent.

After a few moments of that, Kai finally asked:

"So… are you going to dig it out? No, wait. You probably have better things to do."

He glanced at Slayer, then looked away and added wistfully:

"I guess… I should dig it out?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then shook his head.

"No. At least not yet. I have another candidate in mind."

With that, he took a deep breath and turned into a shadow.

Nothing happened for a long while.

Then, suddenly, a flood of ash escaped from the shadow, rising into the sky like a towering pillar. Then the pillar of ash bent and plummeted down, twisting as it assumed form.

Soon enough, the maw of an enormous black worm struck the slope of the mountain, easily burrowing into the seemingly impregnable rock.

The shadow turned into a human once again. Sunny gave Kai a faltering smile, trying to hide how strained every fiber of his being was.

"That… uh… that should be quicker, no?"

Chapter-2351: Sacred Shade

Sunny had never been able to summon the shade of Condemnation, and that was not for the lack of trying.

The shadow of the fallen god simply refused to submit to his will. It was too vast, too ancient, and too unfathomable to be compelled by his commands, while Sunny himself was not nearly powerful enough to assert his authority over it.

In a sense, trying to deal with the shadow of Condemnation was even more difficult than trying to command the Fragment of the Shadow Realm.

After becoming a Supreme, Sunny could manipulate the Fragment a little bit — enough so to separate it from the Nameless Temple, at least, even if it had felt like moving a mountain. The Fragment was devoid of personality, though, while the shadow of Condemnation… it had a mind of its own.

Or a shadow of a mind of its own, at least.

In any case, Sunny could not summon the shadow of Condemnation. The dead god remained in the tranquil darkness of his soul, seemingly at peace, and since it was the only shade of the Sacred Rank there, Sunny simply assumed that he could not command shades of a higher Rank than his own.

After facing the Snow Worm in battle, though, he started to doubt that theory.

The Cursed Beast had been dreadful and dreadfully powerful, true, but not… beyond the realm of understanding, when compared to Sunny. More than that, Sunny had already experienced if not overpowering, then at least defeating the creature's Will.

Plus, unlike Condemnation, he had killed the Snow Worm with his own two hands… metaphorically speaking.

In truth, of course, he had killed it with his boot.

So who was to say that he could not command its shade? How could the shadow of a mere Beast rebel against the Lord of Shadows?

So, that was exactly what Sunny tried to do. He tried to summon the shade of the Snow Worm and make it follow his commands.

The result… was both promising and disappointing.

Just like Condemnation, the Snow Worm… Abundance… refused to answer Sunny's call. Really, it was not even so much a refusal as it was a flat-out indifference. Both Sacred shades simply ignored Sunny and his commands.

However, unlike Condemnation, Abundance was not so immense as to be indomitable. So, Sunny let his temper flare and descended upon the simple-minded shadow with all the ferocious power of his cold and imposing Will.

'Come here, you!'

…That, too, felt like moving a mountain.

The thing, though, was that Sunny actually possessed enough willpower to move this particular mountain.

And so, the mountain answered his call and came to him.

'Ah…'

Sunny felt a crushing pressure fall upon him the moment the shadow of Abundance reluctantly passed through the gate of his soul and escaped into the miniature world of Ariel's Game.

"That… uh… that should be quicker, no?"

He pretended to smile while wincing on the inside.

Controlling a Sacred shade was different from controlling the other members of his Shadow Legion. Summoning his army of shades, even those of the Supreme Rank, felt effortless and natural. Summoning the shade of Abundance, though, required him to keep overcoming its reluctance both continuously and meticulously. Needless to say, that put quite a strain on Sunny.

In short, it was like riding an enraged bull.

…Sunny assumed that bulls were some kind of horse-like creatures who somehow managed to be even more ill-tempered than horses. Considering that the only horse he knew was Nightmare, that painted a pretty horrifying picture.

He did not know why anyone sane would choose to ride such a creature, but the experience must have been similar to his attempts at keeping Abundance under control.

There was another unexpected complication to summoning a Sacred shade, as well. Usually, Sunny did not need to worry about essence while commanding his Shadow Legion — the flow of it he received from his shades was far greater than the expenditure needed to keep them summoned. The situation was reversed for the shadow of Abundance, though.

Not only was the Ash Domain weak and feeble when compared to Sunny's actual Domain, but keeping the damn worm summoned was consuming his essence at a disheartening rate. He would not be able to maintain the summoning indefinitely… he would not be able to maintain it for too long, even, which meant that calling upon Sacred shades was a tool that had to be used strategically.

It was still amazing news for Sunny, though.

Not because Abundance would be able to excavate the volcano and retrieve its own figure faster than Kai would, of course.

Rather, it was because Sunny had been worried about the Rank of his enemies for a while, now. It was a stroke of great luck that the first Snow figure they had faced was a swarm of Great Beasts — slaying them had not only weakened the Snow Domain, but also empowered

Sunny.

If the rest of the abominations on the board had been Cursed, however, then he would not have been able to grow his army exponentially. And that was what Sunny had been counting on… that was his only hope of winning the Death Game despite starting it in a tremendously disadvantaged position.

In a position so hopeless and dire that it had made Ariel, the Demon of Dread, admit defeat.

'Look carefully, Snow Tyrant, whoever you are.'

Sunny's smile grew firmer as he watched Abundance burrow into solid rock.

He was going to slay the abominations of the Snow Domain, one after another, and turn them into his own soldiers.

And with those soldiers, he was going to lay siege the Snow Castle, and bring its ruler down.

Best of all, he was going to bring his army of Sacred shades out of Ariel's Game into the real world.

So, the piece of Weaver's Lineage was not the only boon he would carry away from this strange, deadly miniature world.

'How nice. There are ten of them left, aren't there?'

Kai looked at him dubiously.

"What are you thinking about? You look… suspiciously cheerful."

Sunny laughed happily.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how there are ten more eldritch horrors waiting to kill us in horrendous ways. Isn't it wonderful?"

Kai exhaled slowly.

"Wonderful? Oh, wonderful. Wonderful, he says. And he means it,

too! That… is not the word I would have used…"

Chapter-2352: Shrine of Truth

In the evening, they abandoned the newly formed volcano and moved west. And in the morning, the volcano was no more, conquered by the Clockwork Giant and transformed into a snow-covered mountain.

Sunny quietly mourned the destruction of yet another manor he had built.

'What even is the point? Ah, I already miss my weirdly stiff, but overly soft sofa…'

He did not miss any Memory more than he missed the Shadow Chair.

Now that they had moved one more square west, the Axis Tree finally disappeared from view. That was a relief for Sunny, who did not need to feel the gaze of the Snow Devil anymore… but at the same time, it made him tense, because they had no way of knowing what the Devil was doing now.

That paled in comparison to the fact that they finally saw the Shrine of Truth, though. Well, Kai saw it… maybe Slayer, too. Sunny was simply comforted by the thought that it was there.

He could see eight surrounding peaks from the current square. The Shrine was two moves away, diagonally northwest of their position.

Diagonally southwest, meanwhile, similarly two moves away from the Shrine…

"Are you certain?"

Kai nodded grimly.

"Yes. That should be the Snow Demon."

Sunny frowned. The Snow Demon seemed to have abandoned the corner of the board, moving one square up. That made little sense, considering that it could have reached the Shrine of Truth already…

Unless the Snow Tyrant wanted to use the Shrine as a lure to trap Sunny and his Ash Beasts, with nowhere to retreat. If that was its plan, then the Snow Demon would politely let them pass instead of intercepting them come morning.

Sunny sighed.

"So, what does it look like?"

Kai hesitated for a while.

"Well, I'm not sure."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How come? Don't you have the all-seeing eye?"

Kai smiled faintly.

"No… I merely have the most-seeing eye."

He chuckled quietly and added in a neutral tone:

"Remember how you mentioned creepy wraiths made of snow?"

Sunny did vaguely remember suggesting something like that when they had first encountered the Snow Devil.

"Don't tell me."

Kai nodded.

"Indeed. The Snow Demon is a creepy wraith made of snow. There is a blizzard raging on the mountains, and something is hiding in that blizzard. But I'm not sure what it is. Honestly, I only noticed its presence because the currents of snow seem unnatural, as if avoiding something… or someone."

Sunny sighed.

"My damned tongue. Why couldn't I have suggested pretty wraiths made of snow instead of creepy ones? Or better yet, creepy wraiths made of delicious food. That'd be great, too."

Kai scratched his head.

"Can wraiths be made of food? I thought wraiths were supposed to be intangible."

Sunny grimaced.

"You make a fair point."

He lingered for a moment, and then added in a disgruntled tone:

"Have I ever mentioned that I hate wraiths? I once spent a few thousand years with a wraith stuck in my head. It had its uses, sure, but by the dead gods! Having a head wraith is so obnoxious. I do not recommend."

Kai stared at him silently for a while.

Eventually, he asked in an even tone:

"Who do you hate more, wraiths or birds?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"What an interesting question."

He contemplated the answer, then shook his head decisively.

"Birds are still worse. Definitely."

With that, he wandered off to find a place to rest.

Sunny had been joking, but hunger was letting itself be known. It was merely a psychological dependency, of course, since he could sustain himself on nothing but his essence… Kai was far from being weakened by the lack of food, as well. Saints could go without sustenance for a long while.

But everything was relative, of course.

If it had been Effie whom Sunny took with him on this journey, for example, she would have been dead or dying from hunger by now, because of her Flaw. The realization that he could have led one of his friends to their death, and had only been spared that guilt by dumb luck, made Sunny feel… enraged.

He had not felt that powerless in a long, long while. It was not a good feeling at all, but the truth was both obvious and ruthless.

No matter how much Sunny had grown, and no matter how well he prepared, he was still nothing in front of beings like the Demon of Dread. The laws of a miniature realm Ariel had created to use as a toy were enough to render all Sunny's power meaningless.

'I'll throw this damned board into the Sky Below after we get out of here.'

…But of course, he wouldn't. Ariel's Game was too precious.

Once it was cleared of the dreadful abominations left here by Ariel and Weaver, it could be populated by far more manageable monsters. Then, it could be used as a training tool for the Saints who aspired to become Sovereigns, or even for those Supremes who had risen to their Rank only recently.

After all, while the Ash Domain was a downgrade for Sunny, the experience of ruling it could be precious to someone else.

He sighed and went about his business.

In the morning, the Snow Demon remained where it was, indicating that Sunny's suspicion was true — the Snow Tyrant was leaving the road to the Shrine of Truth wide open, intending to completely surround them there.

Sunny did not mind, though. In fact, that was exactly what he wanted to happen, as well.

They traveled one more square west in the evening, reaching the westernmost column of squares. At dawn, the Snow Demon once again remained in place, while the Clockwork Giant once again conquered the volcano they had just left.

'That makes two.'

Once they reached the Shrine, both the Snow Demon and the Snow Beast would make one move north, surrounding Sunny and his companions from south and east. That would only leave a third enemy to close the blockade from the north — and then, the three of them could attack the Shrine together.

Sunny did not know who the third enemy would be, but he was going to find out soon.

Finally, on their sixth sunset in Ariel's Game, they reached the Shrine of Truth.

Stepping on the slope of the lonesome mountain, Sunny knew that this was where the decisive battles of this Death Game were going to be fought.

He sighed heavily.

'Game on, I guess.'

Chapter-2353: Sacred Battlefield

The square of the Shrine was not different from the rest of them. It had been a snow-covered mountain before, but now that the Ash Domain swallowed it, the peak of the mountain shattered, and rivers of lava flowed down its slopes, melting away the snow and ice. Soon enough, it was covered in ash.

Sunny and his companions slowly ascended the slope of the newly born volcano, not in a hurry to reach the caldera. There was some time to spare, after all, since their enemies would need at least two moves to launch an attack.

'It's interesting.'

Sunny looked at the pillar of smoke rising into the sky.

He was reminded of his First Nightmare — the Nameless Temple had also been located atop a snowy peak, after all. But now, the peak of the mountain had exploded and crumbled, replaced by the crater of a fuming volcano. This meant that the Shrine of Truth could not have been located there.

'Was it hidden in a cave?'

He could ask Kai, but really, Sunny was not that curious.

Kai, meanwhile, seemed a little troubled.

"This time, there will be three Snow figures launching an attack at the same time, won't there?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Most likely."

The charming archer exhaled slowly.

"The two we killed were already terrible enough. Are you sure we will be able to handle three at the same time?"

Sunny hesitated for a little while.

"Well, we also have the Obsidian Hive and the shadow of Abundance with us now. And we don't need to kill all three — we just need to hold out until the sun rises. If we fortify this place well, it should be doable."

His expression darkened a little.

"The real problem is that we will have to repel them the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that… as many times as it takes until one side is entirely obliterated."

He smiled faintly.

"But that was the very reason we decided to come here, wasn't it? To grow stronger every time a Snow figure is sacrificed to the Shrine of Truth."

In fact, Sunny hoped that he would be able to make use of the Shrine even before the first siege. He carried two jade figurines, after all… the idea of wasting two truths pained him, but if the figures could be sacrificed to strengthen him and his allies, he was willing to part with them.

Kai chuckled.

"You are still full of confidence, I see. Aren't you even a little bit afraid?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Why would I be? These things stopped scaring me a long, long time ago. It's like I've exhausted all the fear allotted to me at birth… ah, but I am not completely fearless. Do you know what really frightens me?"

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Sunny took a deep breath and shivered.

"Watching Nephis pour honey on the pancakes I made. Now that's… that's terrifying."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"What's wrong with honey?"

Sunny gave him an indignant glare.

"Everything! The better question would be what's right with honey… who in their right mind would taint innocent pancakes with something so vile?!"

The charming archer just stared at him silently for a while, then took a shaky breath.

"And you're being sincere, too. But if you fear honey so much, why not tell Nephis to stop using it?"

Sunny coughed in and looked away.

"Well… why would I? If she likes honey, I am willing to fill the entire Ivory Tower with honey. If that is not enough, I'll replace the water in the lake with honey, too."

Kai laughed.

"Aren't you sweet? Just like…"

Sunny gave him a dark look.

"I suggest you stop there, pal. If you know what's good for you."

Kai only laughed louder.

Eventually, they crested the edge of the caldera and started the descent. Soon enough, they reached the main vent of the volcano and the pillar of smoke rising from it.

The Shrine of Truth rested on a platform suspended above the abyssal chasm on soot-covered chains. Unlike the Ash Castle, though, there was no fortress on the platform. Instead, there was a charred temple built from large blocks of stone, its edifice turned black by ash and smoke.

Tall pillars, a broad frieze, a triangular pediment decorated by weathered reliefs…

The Shrine of Truth looked vaguely familiar, like a shabby cousin of the Nameless Temple. The two were not exactly the same, but definitely resembled each other, as if built in the same style.

Sunny stared at the charred temple for a few moments.

'Curious.'

He knew that the Nameless Temple was truly ancient. Since it had been originally dedicated to all seven gods of the pantheon, it must have been built at the very dawn of existence — after the Void was sealed, but before the seventh god was forgotten, his very memory forbidden.

The daemons had been born roughly at the same time, so this kind of temple must have just become ingrained in Ariel's mind in the days of his youth. So, when he needed to create a rough model of a temple, he could have simply defaulted to this style without thinking too much.

Sunny tilted his head.

Was it right, to think about daemons in such simple terms? To imagine them so human?

Daemons had been born Sacred, having been torn from the soul of a god. So, they could not have been too human…

That said, they had been young once, too. They had experienced passions and sorrows, too. They had walked the Path of Ascension and elevated themselves to the Divine Rank.

So, who was to say that they had shared no similarity to mortal men

like Sunny and Kai?

Shaking his head, he turned to Slayer and grinned.

"Should I toss you over the chasm again?"

She gave him a cold, sinister look… then took a graceful step toward Kai, stopping near him silently.

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'Ah! The bitter pain of betrayal…'

Chapter-2354: Plentiful Choices

The interior of the Shrine of Truth was much like the interior of the Ash Castle — a mere facsimile of an actual structure, as opposed to a real one. It was one vast chamber, more modest in size than the smoke-filled hall of the crumbling fortress, but still large enough for an enormous Nightmare Creature to occupy.

Of course, there were no Nightmare Creatures inside at the moment — just Sunny, Kai, and Slayer.

The Shrine was not exactly comfortable, but at least there was no ash falling on them from above. The smoke was contained in the middle of the great chamber, so the rest of it was clean, and even pleasantly cool.

Kai studied their temporary shelter for a few moments, then sighed.

"Honestly, it is a bit of a downgrade compared to the houses you've been building. You are getting quite good at making those."

Sunny chuckled.

"Am I? That's good to hear."

He shook his head.

"I spent most of my life being homeless, you know. So, in the end, I got myself a home that can follow me around… and eat my enemies…"

He let out a wistful sigh.

"Who knew I wouldn't be able to bring it with me, this time?"

Sunny shook his head again and headed toward the pillar of smoke.

Apart from its shape and size, the interior of the Shrine of Truth was different from the Ash Castle in two ways. First of all, since this volcano had just emerged, there was only a thin layer of ash on the floor. Secondly…

Sunny reached the circular pit leading to the depths of the volcano and stopped, looking at its edge with a thoughtful expression.

'I feel like I was right.'

Instead of a single pedestal, there were two altars in front of the pit.

If Sunny's suspicion was correct, they were meant for the jade figurines. One altar would allow him to exchange a Snow figure for a truth, while the other… the other would most likely allow him to sacrifice it in exchange for some kind of boon, either for himself or for his warriors.

He was not going to decide how to spend his trophies just yet, though. First, he needed to learn the identity of the third Snow abomination they would be fighting in two dawns.

"Let's rest for a bit."

Kai had commented how the Shrine of Truth was not that comfortable, but nothing prevented Sunny from making it more habitable. He manifested a few pieces of furniture and sprawled on a sofa, feeling a little satisfied by the fact that it felt far less weird than the previous ones.

He had not slept inside Ariel's Game yet, and while there was no real need to, Sunny still felt himself drifting into a slumber. There would probably be no opportunity for him to rest later, so he could just as well use this last one.

Sleep did not come easily, though, and Sunny soon found himself laying there, wide awake, plagued by uninvited thoughts. Eventually, he sighed and sat up.

Kai was awake, too, looking at the billowing smoke with a distant expression. Sunny rubbed his eyes, then stared at the charming archer silently.

"Is something bothering you, Sunny?"

He smiled crookedly.

"I guess."

Sunny remained quiet for a few moments, then said:

"You are a curious person. You know that, right, Kai?"

The charming archer raised an eyebrow and turned to look at him.

"Me? If anything, I thought that I was quite a boring person. Compared to my comrades, I mean."

Sunny scoffed.

"Oh, but that is exactly what makes you curious. The fact that you are different from the rest of us."

Kai remained silent, as if inviting him to continue. Sunny leaned on the backrest of the sofa and sighed.

"This armor I wear was forged by Nether, the Demon of Destiny. He is also known as the Demon of Choice. And here we are, searching for a piece of the Demon of Fate. Fate, destiny, choice… you might not know it, but all these things are of great interest to me."

He crossed his arms.

"It used to be that very few people, apart from the Legacy scions, got to choose whether they wanted to be infected by the Nightmare Spell or not. They were forced to face the First Nightmare, and then, they were forced to enter the Dream Realm come the winter solstice. Some survived, and some didn't. However, once the carriers of the Spell Awakened… then, they finally got to choose something for themselves. Whether they wanted to challenge the Second Nightmare, or not."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"At least in theory. In truth, none of us had a real choice in that

matter. For Nephis, it was the only way to survive and return to the waking world. For Effie, it was the only way to gain a healthy body. For Cassie, it was a necessary step toward fixing what she had broken. Mordret was a mirror wraith with no vessel to call his own. Jet had to keep growing stronger to survive her Flaw. As for me… well, I could not allow myself to fall behind someone."

He pointed to Kai.

"So, really… out of all of us, only you had that choice, Kai. You could have stayed Awakened and spent the rest of your life in safety, living comfortably. And yet, you still chose to answer the Call of Nightmare. So, I am curious… why?"

Kai seemed a little uncomfortable. He lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I guess… I did indeed have the luxury of making more choices than most of my friends. At first, I did exactly what you said — stayed safe and lived comfortably, closing my eyes to the sorrows of others. That was in the Bright Castle. But after escaping the Forgotten Shore, I did not want to live like that anymore."

He smiled.

"Someone once told me — I don't quite recall who — that strength was the only virtue, while weakness was the only sin. It seemed convincing at first, but then, I changed my mind. Actually, having strength but misusing it felt like a far greater sin than being weak. I had already sinned by being weak, so after Awakening, I did not want to sin again by wasting my strength. So, I chose responsibility instead. I also chose to follow my friends, who did not have the same freedom of choice I had."

Sunny leaned forward a little.

"That is exactly it. You had freedom, but surrendered it in favor of responsibility."

His eyes grew darker.

"Don't you ever regret it? Don't you miss the freedom you gave up?"

Kai simply laughed.

His eventual answer made Sunny flinch a little...

"No. I haven't missed it once."

Chapter-2355: Empty Vessel

Sunny studied Kai intently, hiding his surprise. He had expected his friend to give a negative answer, of course — after all, he knew Kai too well to think otherwise. And yet, the categorical nature of his denial left Sunny rattled.

He leaned back a little, frowning.

"Not… even once?"

Kai shrugged.

"Of course. This freedom you talk about… well, it is an elusive concept, I guess? It changes depending on how you define it. Are we talking about freedom from responsibility, from duty, from having to act on behalf of others?"

The charming archer smiled softly.

"If so, then I see no reason to regret surrendering it. You seem to regard freedom as something inherently positive, but is it, really? To me, it seems that freedom is neither good nor bad — rather, it is like a transparent, empty vessel. You can fill it with good things or bad things, making it either benign or malignant… but the very act of placing something in the vessel breaks it, and you're not free anymore. So, I guess it's a bit of a paradox."

He sighed.

"The only way to remain free, in this context, is to leave the vessel empty. And while emptiness is neither benign nor malignant, it is certainly… much sadder than either."

Kai shook his head.

"The things I filled my vessel with suit me fine. So what if it's not empty and transparent anymore? Why would I want to live a life of emptiness, anyway?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"I guess there's no reason. But, still… doesn't everyone want to be free?"

Kai considered his question seriously.

"True, people generally long to be free — free to live their lives the way they want, that is, not to be free for the sake of freedom. So, what they really want is freedom to make their own choices, not freedom from the consequences of those choices. Even if they become bound to something as a result, unable to do as they want anymore as a result."

Sunny smiled bitterly.

"Ah… that old nugget of wisdom."

He remained silent for a while, looking into the distance somberly.

"Someone told me once that no one is really free in this world. Everyone is chained to someone, or something… so, the only real freedom there is is the freedom to choose your own chains."

He grinned darkly.

"Of course, I proved this wisdom wrong. Using your metaphor, I put the broken vessel back together and cleaned it until its walls were transparent once again."

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"It's strange. You are telling the truth, and yet, what you say can't possibly be true."

Sunny was surprised.

"Can't possibly be true? How so?"

Noticing his bewilderment, Kai chuckled.

"I mean… I might have some responsibilities, but they are really nothing compared to what you, Sunny, have chosen to bear. You volunteered to fight in the Domain War despite not having a stake in that fight, carried the weight of countless lives on your shoulders, faced a Sovereign in battle, and took his crown. Now, you are one of the two guardian angels of humanity…well. Maybe a guardian devil is a more fitting term."

Sunny's face twitched.

"Please don't mention angels when I'm around."

Kai gave him a strange look, then shrugged and continued.

"What I mean to say is that you used to enjoy infinitely more freedom than I had ever possessed, and you discarded it all in favor of infinitely more responsibility than I will ever bear. So, how can you claim that your vessel is empty?"

He coughed and looked away.

"Oh, and also... can we steer away from this whole empty vessel metaphor? Honestly, it's not one of my best… lyrics were never my strong suit, but still, I used to be a musician. So it's a bit embarrassing."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Sure, we can."

He remained silent for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well, if you put it that way, there does indeed seem to be a contradiction. Actually, it was exactly as you said. I had strived to break free for a very long time, but when I finally did, it came at a cost. And what followed after… was empty and sad. You don't seem to regret surrendering your freedom, but I was full of regret after gaining mine. I was alone and had nothing, so I made a choice to come back and change everything. That, of course, bound me to a lot of things… and now, I feel compelled to see them through."

Kai smiled.

"Then all is well, no? Since you chose that path yourself."

Sunny sighed, then rubbed his face tiredly.

"It's not that simple. The path is long and winding… what if following it will rob me of the ability to make choices for myself in the future?"

Kai scratched the back of his head.

"Uh… to be honest, I lost track of all these metaphors a bit, so I am not sure I understand. But if the choice not to have as many choices is your own, then all is good, as well. I think?"

Sunny looked at him and smiled.

Then, he laughed.

"So it's okay to be chained as long as I decide to wear shackles myself? All this talk, and we ended up where we started."

Kai gave him a guilty look.

"Sorry if I wasn't helpful. But, in my defense… I have no idea what you are talking about."

Sunny gave him a nod and laid back down on his sofa.

"It's alright. I appreciate you humoring me."

Kai hesitated for a few moments, then said in a tentative tone:

"Perhaps I could be more helpful if you told me what choice you are contemplating."

Sunny yawned.

"Oh, it's just… I'm wondering whether I should go bird hunting sometime in the future. That's all."

Kai opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Then, he exhaled slowly.

"I see. Well, good luck with whatever you decide to do."

After a few moments of silence, he asked:

"Are you going to sleep? If so, I can stand guard. Not that nights here are dangerous."

Sunny sighed, then shook his head.

"No… I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight. So, I'll do something else instead."

Kai leaned back.

"What?"

Sunny smiled.

"Being here inside another one of Ariel's dreadful masterpieces has gotten me inspired. So, I am going to do some sorcery."

His smile grew darker.

"I am going to perform sorcery so grand and terrible that even daemons would have been impressed..."

Chapter-2356: Grand Design

Sunny allowed his body to become a shadow, returning to his natural form.

This time, however, he went a step further.

Letting go of the familiar image of himself, he set the shadow free. Unleashed from the confines of a human silhouette, his shadow swelled and surged in all directions, covering the spacious interior of the Shrine of Truth in an instant. Then, it burst from its gates like a dark tide.

In a matter of moments, Sunny had become vast enough to swallow the entire volcano — up to the point where its slopes disappeared into the sea of clouds, at least. His shadow covered the colossal bowl of the caldera and the ash-covered slopes, flowing into each crack and crevice.

He enveloped the incandescent depths of the main vent, too, as well as the suffocating confines of the secondary fissure vents.

Slayer shifted silently and placed a hand on the hilt of her sword. Kai simply looked around, lingered for a few moments, and closed his eyes to rest.

Sunny, meanwhile, summoned the shade of Abundance. The giant worm rose from the depths of his soul and bit into the rock, crawling through the solid mass of the volcano to a wide tunnel through it. The shades of Obsidian Wasps scurried behind it, clearing the tunnels of debris.

Sunny concentrated, and his vast shadow stirred, countless arms growing from its black depths. His essence flowed like a torrent, and his numerous hands wove it into black strings.

He had considered for a long time what he would weave for the upcoming siege.

In truth… Sunny was not as confident in the outcome of the battle as he had made it look. Fighting three Snow figures, including a Demon, was a perilous task — especially considering how few advantages he had.

The Crystal Wasps had been weakened when they attacked the Ash Castle. But that was because, at that point, the Ash Castles had been bordered by two squares of the same color. The Shrine of Truth, however, would be surrounded by the Snow Domain from all sides during the battle, which meant that the invaders would not be weakened that much, or maybe at all.

Sunny and his companions would not be suppressed either, unlike how they had been during the battles against the Ice Hive and Abundance, but that was all there was to it. The odds were not in their favor.

So, Sunny needed to prepare. And the Sacred soul shard that had fallen into his hands was one of two precious resources he had — the other being the jade figurines.

What would be the best use for it?

Should he create a deadly weapon for himself? A powerful charm that could be enhanced by the Jade Mantle? A tool that would allow him to pull off some insidious trick?

There were too many options, but none of them would be as impactful as he wanted. There was another problem, as well — time.

A Sacred Memory was worthy of a truly sophisticated enchantment, but weaving an intricate enchantment was a long and complicated process. Sunny was not sure that he would be able to complete something so elaborate before the Snow figures descended upon the Shrine of Truth.

So, the enchantment had to be relatively simple, just scaled to an entirely terrifying level of power.

No weapon, charm, or tool he could think of would be able to produce the results he needed while bound by these limitations.

So, Sunny decided to do something else. He decided not to create a Memory at all.

Instead…

He decided to enchant the mountain itself.

All of it, from the deepest part of the caldera to its steep, ash-covered slopes.

The Sacred soul shard would serve as the core of his grand enchantment, while the tunnels Abundance created would become channels for the strings of shadow essence, forming the complicated patterns of an enormous spellweave.

That spellweave would turn all of the fuming volcano into a magical fortress where Sunny would face the Cursed warriors of the Snow Domain, and slay them all one by one.

…Of course, creating such a spellweave was not a simple task. The paths carved by Abundance were crude when compared to what Sunny could weave when creating a Memory. So, he could only imbue the mountain with a relatively simple enchantment.

But that was alright.

He had just an enchantment in mind… a perfect solution to many of the problems facing him.

The scale of forces involved was so terrifying that Sunny could not be sure that his great masterpiece would survive a single battle. But that was alright, too… as long as it served its purpose, he would have a few more powerful shades to assist him during the next siege.

'So much work…'

He sighed silently.

Controlling Abundance was difficult, commanding the Obsidian

Wasps on top of that was straining, and he had to weave the strings of essence to boot.

'I better hurry, though.'

The night passed swiftly. In the morning, the Clockwork Giant and the Snow Demon both moved one square north, just like Sunny had predicted. And at the same time, a third figure arrived at the peak of the snowy mountain to the north, closing the blockade.

It was another Snow Beast — one of the two who had been protecting the Snow Castle, it seemed.

Ignoring the newcomer for the time being, Sunny concentrated on excavating the volcano and forming the grandiose spellweave. He had to control the flow of lava to prevent it from flooding the network of tunnels, but that had proven easy enough to accomplish with a bit of foresight.

In the end, he managed to finish the enchantment with just a few hours to spare before the next dawn.

Assuming the human form for the first time since his candid conversation with Kai, Sunny let out a long sigh and wiped the sweat off his brow.

He was terribly tired.

But there was no time to rest…

Standing up, Sunny lingered for a moment, and then took out the two jade figurines from inside his armor.

They lay on his palm, feeling cold to the touch.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

"Let's deal with you two, then."

Chapter-2357: Second Altar

Slayer was where he had left her, standing silently in the darkness of the Shrine. Now that the sun had risen, a bit of light was falling into the empty hall of the scorched temple through the opening in its roof and the towering fissure of its gates — still, shadows swallowed most of the hall, so her motionless figure was entirely unnoticeable.

Of course, Sunny could see in the dark, so she could not hide from him.

He sighed.

Slayer… was a strange Shadow.

She had been a shadow of a mortal woman once. That woman perished, and her shadow traveled to the Shadow Realm like all shadows did… however, once there, she refused to be destroyed like the rest of them and persisted, hunting down others like her to sustain herself. Whether it was because her sense of self was especially strong or for some other reason, Sunny did not know.

In any case, her stubborn refusal to succumb eventually bore fruit. Slayer ceased to be a mere shadow, and was reborn as a Shadow Creature instead. The passage of time had erased what little remained of her original self, turning her into the feral, ruthless huntress Sunny met — she did not even remember her own name, by then, let alone her past.

She was killed once more, and reborn again… this time, as his Shadow.

So, Slayer was neither human nor a creature, but something in between. She did not possess an Aspect like humans did, but she was also far more intelligent and deadly than a Beast was supposed to be.

Which was to say that she did not possess any special powers. All she had was her skills, her sharp intelligence, her frightening killing intent, and her stubborn will. It was with these tools that she had endured thousands of years of surviving in the Shadow Realm, crafting weapons and arrows from pieces of obsidian, preparing traps for her enemies, and hiding when an essence storm passed nearby.

Perhaps that had not always been the case, though. She was a strange Shadow full of soul essence instead of shadow essence, after all — not quite Transcendent, but not quite Supreme either. Maybe Slayer had indeed wielded some kind of power, or even an Aspect, before her radiant soul deteriorated and lost its initial form.

Maybe her Aspect could be recovered one day.

In any case, Sunny was not going to think less of her — or consider her less of a threat — simply because Slayer did not have any special powers. She was incredibly menacing even without them, after all, to which he could personally attest.

Still, he was very curious to see how the Shrine of Truth would make her stronger.

The same held true for Kai… in fact, Sunny had no idea how the Shrine of Truth was supposed to work. All he knew was what Seishan had told them — that killing an enemy figure on this square was supposed to make the killer more powerful, somehow.

All of them desperately needed to grow more powerful, so that was really fortunate. The fact that the jade figurines could seemingly substitute kills was, as well.

'I wonder what Ariel's Game will do.'

Would it grant them a sorcerous boon? Evolve the figure to a higher Class? Bestow magical weapons and equipment upon them?

Would these boons be permanent, or would they disappear as soon as they left the board?

He was going to learn soon.

Just as Sunny headed to the center of the Shrine, Kai descended from above, landed near him, and smiled.

"Sunny… are you done with your sorcery?"

Sunny nodded and said, his voice both tired and satisfied:

"Yes. It turned out well, despite the difficulty. Ah, am I not a genius? Who else could have invented something so groundbreaking, huh?"

He looked at Kai with a hint of expectation, remained silent for a moment, then added:

"Groundbreaking. Get it?"

Kai coughed suddenly.

"Oh… yes. The volcano has been shaking quite a lot. I was afraid there was going to be an eruption."

Sunny chuckled.

"That was just me excavating the mountain. Come, I'll explain what I did in detail a bit later."

As they walked toward the two altars, Slayer following silently from behind, Sunny gave Kai a curious look.

"You are back from observing the enemy, right? So, who is our guest from the north?"

Kai frowned a little.

"Well… it is a Beast. However, it is not a single beast."

Sunny stopped for a moment and blinked a few times.

"Don't tell me, are there another hundred of them?"

Kai shook his head lightly.

"No. There seems to be around a dozen — a pack. They look like ghostly wolves made of snow."

Sunny grinned.

"A pack? Finally, good news!"

This might have been terrible news, actually, but Sunny believed otherwise. He did not think that Cursed Ones were so plentiful as to travel in packs… so, the Snow Wolves had to be Great Beasts.

Which meant that he would not have to battle three Cursed Nightmare Creatures at the same time.

"Great, great… the more, the merrier!"

Smiling brightly, he approached the two altars and studied them intently.

The one on the right looked almost identical to the altar in the Ash Castle. The one on the left, however, was quite different.

It might have had some runes and engravings carved into it once, but everything had been smoothed out and erased by the passage of time. Now, the altar was simply covered by soot.

Sunny could still see the indentation in the center of the altar, though, just the right size for a jade figure to fit.

He sighed.

'Here goes my opportunity to learn two tantalizing truths…'

It was funny, really. He had expected the Shrine of Truth to be a place where one learned truths, but instead, he was going to sacrifice truths in order to gain power.

"Here, take this."

He handed one jade figurine to Kai, the other to Slayer.

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"Me? I thought you would try to strengthen yourself."

Sunny shook his head dismissively.

"I am plenty strong already — so, maybe later. The two of you need to become more useful right now, though."

Taking a step back, he gestured to the altar.

"Come on. Put the Snow Beast figure on it."

Kai hesitated a little.

"So… uh… and what will happen when I do?"

Sunny grinned.

"No idea! We'll know soon, won't we?"

Kai frowned slightly.

"You're… not letting me go first just to see if something terrible happens before trying it yourself, are you?"

Sunny looked at him with reproach.

"Of course not."

His smile returned.

"If that was my goal, I would have let Slayer go first!"

He looked at Slayer, scratched the back of his head, and added quietly:

"This definitely has nothing to do with the fact that, as a Shadow, she would be an unreliable test subject… believe me…"

Chapter-2358: First Ring

With a sigh, Kai walked over to the altar and placed the Snow Beast figure — the one they had retrieved after slaying Abundance — on its surface.

Sunny watched him intently, wondering if the figure would still have to be tossed into the volcano. And how would it have worked if the Shrine of Truth belonged to the Snow Domain, instead? There would be no pit filled with smoke here if it had been, after all.

However, he did not have to worry. Almost as soon as Kai placed the figure on the altar, it started to glow. Then, incandescent fissures appeared on the surface of the flawless white jade, and a moment later, it suddenly exploded into a swirling mass of ash.

"Huh…"

Before either of them could react, the ash swirled around Kai… and then suddenly flowed right into him, disappearing into his chest.

Neither Sunny nor Kai moved for a few seconds.

Eventually, Kai coughed and waved his hand in front of him.

"Great. More ash…"

His expression was a little miserable.

They had enough water to drink, but not enough of it to properly clean themselves. Considering the nature of the Ash Domain, with its pillars of smoke and ash constantly falling from the sky, that meant that Kai was constantly covered in smears of soot.

The charming archer had managed to maintain a neat appearance even on the Forgotten Shore, so Sunny knew how much his friend

was suffering.

"Kai… hey, Kai…"

The charming archer turned and looked at him bitterly.

"What?"

Sunny sighed.

"Did you not notice? That cloud of ash did not just swirl around you. It went into you, you fool!"

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"It did?"

Sunny nodded.

In fact, the whole process looked quite familiar. It was similar to how essence entered Awakened when they broke soul shards, to the point that Sunny was inclined to assume that Ariel had modeled the process to look the same.

He hesitated for a moment.

"How… how do you feel?"

Kai looked into the distance, as if concentrating on the state of his body. Slowly, a startled expression appeared on his face.

"I feel… stronger. Much stronger."

Sunny studied him for a bit, then shifted his gaze and studied Kai's soul.

Eventually, he said in a curious tone:

"Well, buddy, I don't know how to tell you this… but there's a ring of ash surrounding your soul core now."

He was, of course, telling the truth. There, under his gaze, Kai's Transcendent soul core was shining brightly with beautiful light. But

now, there was a ring of ash suspended around it, countless black flakes shining with reflected radiance.

It looked very much like a planet surrounded by a thin ring system.

Strangely enough, the soul essence that flowed in and out of Kai's core passed through the ring of ash first, assuming a new and strange quality.

Kai flinched.

"There's ash… inside me?!"

He looked like someone desperately wishing to take a shower.

Sunny cleared his throat, then patted him on the shoulder.

"Relax. It's… mystical ash, not real ash. Point is, it's making you stronger, so all is good, right?"

Kai let out a long sigh. Sunny studied him for a moment, then asked:

"But, more importantly… how much stronger is it making you, exactly?"

The charming archer remained silent for a while, then said evenly:

"I am not entirely sure, but… I feel like I can crush a mountain."

Sunny grinned.

"How about you try crushing me, first?"

He summoned a pedestal made of shadows and put his elbow on it, inviting Kai to an armwrestling match. After a brief struggle, the back of the charming archer's hand slammed into the pedestal, and he took a step back, massaging it with a pained expression.

"...Ouch."

Sunny contemplated for a bit, then smiled.

"You're not exactly as strong as a Supreme Beast, but you are way

stronger than a Transcendent should be now. Your essence has become more potent, and even your will seems to be receiving a boost. I can understand the former, but how the hell does the latter work?"

Not only had Kai's will become more intense, but it also felt… familiar, somehow.

Cold, and murderous.

Quite unpleasant, really.

Like the Will of a despicable, unhinged psychopath…

'Wait.'

That was the flavor of Sunny's own will!

He blinked a couple of times, then stared at Kai again.

'No, it actually makes sense?'

Kai was being enhanced by the Ash Domain, and who was the ruler of that Domain at the moment?

It was Sunny!

So the source of the force empowering Kai was not Ariel's Game itself, but the Ash Tyrant. The Ash Beast was being strengthened by the power of its ruler, with the laws of the miniature realm, and the ash itself, serving as intermediaries.

'But if I am the master of the Ash Domain…'

Sunny extended his power outward, trying to shape ash like he had always shaped shadows. To his surprise, it worked — a bit of ash rose into the air, solidifying into a crude effigy of a human.

Allowing the effigy to crumble, Sunny peered into Kai's soul once more.

'If I can manipulate this ash, then won't I be able to influence that

ash, as well?'

And indeed, he felt a subtle connection.

Using this connection, Sunny poured more of his will into the ring surrounding Kai's soul core. It accepted a bit, but rejected the rest, as if reaching its capacity.

Sunny looked up, studying Kai's face.

"...And how much stronger do you feel now?"

Kai moved his shoulders slightly.

"Hmm. I can't say that I feel any stronger. But… I am not quite sure how to explain it, but I do feel much deadlier."

Sunny remained silent for a while, staring at him with a neutral expression.

Then, he grinned widely.

"That you are!"

With that, he looked the other way.

"Slayer… Slayer! Your turn, now. Come on, put the figure on the altar!"

As the same minor miracle happened to his Shadow, Sunny laughed.

"Great. Amazing! That is almost like a miniature, way more modest version of what happened to me once."

Kai gave him a hesitant look.

"And… what happened to you, exactly?"

Sunny shrugged dismissively.

"Oh, nothing too crazy. I just received a blessing by making a sacrifice on an altar once, too. Of course, I did not have such handy jade figurines with me back then, so I had to sacrifice myself… good

thing Shadow God was in the mood to rise from the dead for a moment and bless me."

Kai sighed.

"Right. Nothing too crazy. Indeed!"

Chapter-2359: First Siege

Kai and Slayer had little time to get used to their new power… granted, Slayer had not required time for adjustment at all. She simply took the change that had happened to her because of the boon of ash in stride, as if remembering something she already knew instead of coming to terms with something new.

Then again, she wasn't very expressive, so it was hard to tell what was on her mind.

'Why am I always surrounded by stoic women?'

Sunny chuckled. Perhaps it was neither good luck nor bad luck, but simply a sign of the times. Considering the world they all lived in and the horrors Awakened faced, it was really not that surprising that there were a lot of strong, silent types walking around.

'Couldn't be me…'

Kai, meanwhile, had spent the few hours left until sunrise training. He performed a variety of exercises and shot his bow hundreds of times, slowly getting used to his newfound strength. Sunny observed him, feeling like he was watching an intricate masterpiece of a machine tune itself to perfection.

Then, the sky in the east finally brightened, and as the violent winds howled in the distance, a familiar snowstorm enveloped the world. Plumes of snow stretched toward the fuming volcano like tentacles, ready to turn into glass bridges as soon as the first ray of sunlight spilled over the horizon.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

"Get ready."

He felt a bit of trepidation in his heart.

This time, they were going to be attacked by three figures of the Snow Domain — a Cursed Demon, a Cursed Beast, and a pack of Great Beasts. Therefore, he had to split his forces to face all three threats simultaneously.

Slayer and a number of Obsidian Wasps would be defending the north slope of the volcano against the Snow Wolves. Kai and the shadow of Abundance would defend the east slope against the Clockwork Giant. Sunny and the rest of his shades… were going to face the Cursed Demon on the southern side of the mountain.

The odds were not in their favor, but thankfully, they did not have to defeat their fearsome enemies. All Sunny and his companions really had to do was hold the enemy back until the dawn exhausted itself.

That said… Sunny had no intention of choosing a passive strategy. Only death was waiting for them that way.

True, they could simply hold the enemy back, but that would simply mean facing the same threat tomorrow. And by tomorrow, their power would be diminished — they would be wounded, lacking essence, with fewer shades to help them in battle. The burden of consecutive battles would only mount after that, and sooner or later, it would crush them.

So, Sunny had to finish today's battle — and every battle after that — in a way that would leave him more powerful than he had been yesterday. That meant removing at least one Snow figure off the board, or better yet all of them. If he managed that, there would be new shades in his slowly growing army, and new jade figurines for his companions to sacrifice.

'Let's hope things go according to plan.'

Sunny had an ace hidden up his sleeve, of course — the grand enchantment he had woven into the mountain. But there were certain conditions that had to be met for his sorcery to work, and both he and his companions would have to work hard in order to make sure that it delivered the desired result.

Which was complete and utter annihilation, of course.

"What do you think, guys? Will we convince the Snow Tyrant not to underestimate us too much?"

He glanced at the Obsidian Wasps that surrounded him from both sides. Considering their size, Sunny had to crane his neck a little to look at their expressionless, gemlike eyes.

Their eyes were huge and compound, so he could see hundreds of his reflections staring back at him.

…It was a good thing that Mordret wasn't around.

In any case, the Wasps did not respond, making him sigh in disappointment.

"I mean, who does that bastard take me for? Sending a mere Demon and two Beasts to kill me… how humiliating."

He forced out an unconvincing smile.

Of course, Sunny knew that the Snow Tyrant was probably not trying to kill him seriously today. Rather, today's battle was merely meant to wound and exhaust the Ash Tyrant until the true elites of the Snow Domain arrived — the Devils, the Monsters…

The coming days would be quite eventful, to say the least.

This was one more reason why Sunny had to destroy as many Snow figures as he could this morning. The Shrine of Truth could only be attacked from three directions, but that did not mean that it could only be attacked by three figures. If more of them occupied the surrounding peaks, there could be up to ten horrors attacking the fuming volcano at the same time.

Actually, it was a bit strange that the Snow Tyrant had not employed that strategy already. So strange, in fact, that Sunny was starting to suspect that being able to bring several figures to a single square was a unique privilege of the Tyrants. After all, Slayer and Kai had never remained on a mountain without him…

That was something to consider, at least.

As Sunny did just that, the snow plumes finally solidified into ethereal bridges of glistening glass.

The golden light of dawn washed over the sea of clouds. It looked just as dreamlike and beautiful as ever, but Sunny was in no mood to appreciate beauty.

Instead, he watched coldly as a vast protuberance seemed to extend from the milky wall of the snowstorm, as if the blizzard itself was crossing the glass bridge.

That was the Cursed Demon coming to kill him under the cover of swirling snow.

"Ah, hell…"

Summoning the helmet of the Jade Mantle, Sunny reached into the shadows and pulled a black odachi from them.

The Obsidian Wasps seemed to tremble a little, as if shivering in the cold.

Chapter-2360: Leader of the Pack

On the other side of the mountain, Slayer had begun her barrage. The pack of Great Beasts was rushing across the bridge, turning into billowing streams of snow from time to time — Sunny was not sure what Attributes the monstrous Wolves possessed, but they seemed quite elusive.

He did not sense any new shades entering his soul, at least, which meant that none of them had been slain by the arrows.

On the eastern slope of the volcano, Kai sent an arrow flying, as well. Sunny heard it fly — this one was quite unique, having been crafted specifically for the charming archer. Its enchantment allowed him to imbue the arrowhead with sound, which allowed Kai to record his commands and deliver them from a distance.

In other words, the arrow carried his mystical voice.

Far away, the Clockwork Giant had already stepped onto the glass bridge. The singing arrow struck him square in the chest… and powerlessly bounced away, not dealing the Cursed Beast any damage.

That was just as Sunny had expected.

Empowered by the boon of ash and Sunny's own deathly will, Kai might have been able to wound some other Cursed being. But the brass giant looked like a thing that had been created specifically to be sturdy and resilient… practically indestructible.

Sunny had known that this particular enemy would be too tough to be pierced by arrows, enchanted or not. That was the very reason why he had sent Slayer to fight the Snow Wolves — the nature of the malevolent training dummy made it impervious to most of her

arsenal.

In fact, it was probably impervious to most anything, which was why Kai with his rattling sonic attacks and Abundance with its sheer mass were a better choice. Even if they were not able to destroy the Cursed Beast, they would at least be able to stall him.

Sunny was not at all ashamed to use the simple, but effective powers of Abundance to his advantage. A dumb meat shield was a perfect foil for an indestructible enemy.

He was actually most worried about himself.

Unlike his two companions, Sunny did not try to attack the Snow Demon on the bridge. He just waited patiently, watching as the blizzards rushed toward the volcano at great speed.

"Ah. This thing just had to go and make me angry…"

Sunny had not felt any personal animosity toward the Cursed Demon before seeing it advance just now. That was because any creature using a veil of snow as cover reminded him of Winter Beast.

And although Sunny had already killed that Titan, he still carried quite a lot of spite toward it and its ilk in his heart.

"Come here, then."

Finally, the billowing mass of snow reached the slope of the volcano and enveloped it in bitter cold.

This was Sunny's territory, though. This was his Domain.

As soon as the blizzard — and the thing hiding within it — reached the ashen ground, the shadows surged. Darkness swallowed the entire southern side of the volcano, and the ash rose into the air, mixing with the snow.

The ash remained, but the snow turned black and melted, disappearing without a trace. Even the cold winds were suffocated.

In a matter of moments, the blizzard was no more.

And once it was gone, the wraith that had been hiding within it was revealed, standing motionlessly in the hurricane of ash.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"...Unexpected."

What faced him was a frozen corpse.

It was the corpse of an enormous wolf, its rotten fur as white as snow. There were countless crude spears sticking out of its desiccated hide like a palisade, the spearheads carved roughly from flint and obsidian.

The Cursed monstrosity had three eyes, each burning with malevolent, crimson flames… the sight of them reminded Sunny of the primordial hunter Jet had slain once, an eternity ago, in front of the Nightmare Gate in NQSC.

That Gate Guardian had worn a skull with three empty eyes as a helmet, too.

Sunny had suspected that most of the Nightmare Creatures trapped in Ariel's Game had been collected by the daemons in the frozen wastelands west of the Jade Palace.

If so, he could imagine the corpse of the monstrous wolf being encased in ice after dying to the spears of the primordial humans of the bygone era… only to become possessed by a malevolent spirit thousands of years later and emerge from it as a vengeful wraith.

Had it been a monstrous predator who hunted primal humans and feasted on their flesh? Had it been a guardian Spirit of a human tribe whom the hunters from a different one had slain to eradicate the enemy? Had it hunted alone, or had it led other predators like a bestial deity?

Slayer was fighting the pack of wolves on the northern slope of the volcano right now, but this one — this one might have been the leader of the pack.

Or maybe their god.

In any case, Sunny was going to have to face this primordial horror in battle.

The three dreadful eyes of the wolf looked at Sunny, and he felt his very soul shiver and shudder under their gaze. The pressure that descended upon him was suffocating, and he felt something that he had not felt in a long time.

A primal, utterly irrational, overwhelming fear rising to drown his wildly beating heart.

The fear that prey instinctively felt when facing a predator.

Sunny scoffed.

"Hey, you… who do you think you are?"

He took a step forward, walking between the Obsidian Wasps. Then, he pointed to the ground with the tip of his odachi.

"This here is my volcano. So, I suggest you tuck your tail and run."

Instead of answering, the Cursed Demon lowered itself to the ground and let out a chilling growl. Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine, and his very soul trembled, as if straining to remain intact.

He was quite certain that this malevolent growl alone could have snuffed out the souls of countless humans of a lesser Rank — mundane people, Awakened… maybe even Masters. Saints would be left paralyzed and writhing in agony after being exposed to this malice…

He grimaced.

"Very well. Come closer, then… I'll give you the honor of becoming the second god I've slain."

Chapter-2361: As Old and as True as the Sky

The wolf lunged forward.

As it did, the world itself seemed to crumple and shrink, the space folding on itself as the Cursed Demon tore through. Sunny felt it in his bones — an alien, violent presence invading his Domain, its boundless ferocity pushing against the brittle walls of his authority, making them rattle and crack.

'Not… so fast…'

Sunny gritted his teeth and pushed back, asserting his will over the dark expanse of the towering volcano. As he did, the surrounding space became less pliable and more indomitable, as it was meant to be.

So what if the Snow Demon was a god? Sunny was a Sovereign within the bounds of his Domain. He was the ultimate authority here, and a mere Cursed One was not powerful enough to assert dominance over his kingdom.

The three-eyed wolf might not have been weakened by the Ash Domain because the Shrine of Truth was surrounded from all sides by snowy peaks, but it was still an invader here. The rules of Ariel's Game were not helping Sunny, but the laws of existence were — any enemy would be at a great disadvantage when attacking a Supreme within their Domain.

Especially if that Supreme was a Titan.

As Sunny's titanic will clashed with the will of the Snow Demon, the harrowing advance of the latter slowed down — enough so, at least, for the Obsidian Wasps to rush down the slope and intercept the wolf

before it could leap at Sunny.

The shades moved in harmony with each other, assembling into a crescent phalanx as they scurried down the slope at great speed — some moving on the ground, some jumping into the air and unfolding their translucent wings to fly. Sunny was getting better and better at commanding his shades, so this kind of intricate control was not beyond him anymore.

The Wasps were meant to break the Snow Demon's momentum, stall it, and attack it from both sides — opening it up for the punishing attack by Sunny himself.

However, before they could descend upon the monstrous fiend, the figure of the giant wolf suddenly burst into a hurricane of snow. The billowing white wall swallowed the front rows of the shades and simply… erased them from existence, each snowflake cutting into glossy obsidian like a razor-shape blade.

Sunny lost dozens of his Obsidian Wasps in an instant.

Feeling somber, he swiftly called the rest of them back and thrust his odachi deep into the ground.

A web of fractures shot through the slope of the volcano from the point where the black blade pierced the rock, and in the next moment, roaring geysers of incandescent lava shot from under the ground, making the raging snow shine with a beautiful red glow.

The Snow Demon coalesced into its bestial form once more, jumping over the fiery fissures to tear into the retreating shades. Its terrible maw opened and closed, easily crushing several of them between the jade fangs in one bite.

The rest of the Obsidian Wasps escaped into the air, circling around the Cursed abomination like a swarm.

By now, Sunny knew that his shades would not be able to buy him much time… but they could still buy him a second or two to think, at least.

'I wonder…'

Sunny had not fought a lot of Cursed Nightmare Creatures just yet, but he already suspected that each of them embodied some kind of concept — or at least wielded one as a weapon.

The Snow Worm, Abundance, was the easiest example. The name Sunny had given it was also its essence. That Cursed Beast had used the concept of infinity to make itself inexhaustible, indestructible, and inevitable… until it had met an inglorious end by Sunny's hand.

What concept did this Cursed Demon embody, then? What was the weapon it used?

Then again… Beasts were simple creatures by definition. Demons, meanwhile, were beings of a far higher order and sophistication. They were cunning, insidious fiends whose chilling malice was borne of keen intelligence. So, maybe what a Cursed Demon embodied was incomparable to the simple nature of Abundance.

'Who is this enemy of mine?'

Sunny felt that victory or defeat, as well as his very survival, depended on finding a correct answer to this question.

The creature in front of him… had been a bestial Spirit once. A primordial predator who had hunted the first humans at the dawn of time, only to fall to their flint spears when the humans learned to be hunters instead of prey.

Perhaps it had been corrupted by the Void back then, already. Perhaps it had been a benevolent guardian Spirit of a human tribe before falling prey to human malice and being reborn as a dreadful wraith. In any case…

It was truly ancient. It was a being from before history existed, having been born and slain in the age when even the gods were young, let alone the world they had created. A horror from the beginning of… everything.

So, wasn't Sunny's thinking too constricted by the complexities of the modern era?

He felt something — a hint of an intuitive understanding. It came

from the primal fear he had felt when the Snow Demon's gaze fell upon him.

Why did the monstrous wolf have to embody a concept of anything?

Why couldn't it just be the embodiment of a… wolf?

Of the Wolf. The first, or perhaps the most flawless member of their storied tribe.

Sunny shifted slightly, watching the Wolf eviscerate the swarm of hapless Supreme shades.

If his enemy was indeed the embodiment of the concept of a wolf, then it was already at a fatal disadvantage. It was alone, after all…

While the true strength of a wolf was the pack.

Just as Sunny thought that, a litany of chilling howls resounded from the other side of the volcano, where Slayer was fighting the Great Beasts — the Snow Wolves.

He paled.

"...Crap."

At that moment, he knew that he had to prevent the Wolf from uniting with the pack of lesser Beasts on the northern slope of the volcano at all costs.

And he also knew something else.

His odachi rippled and elongated, turning into a black spear.

Sunny dismissed most of his armor and aimed his spear at the harrowing demon.

If his enemy was truly the source and embodiment of all wolves…

Then who was its greatest enemy?

Naturally… it was the hunter.

Chapter-2362: Hunter and Prey

The ultimate enemy of a wolf was the hunter, and therefore, if Sunny wanted to resist the primordial demon who embodied the concept of the Wolf, he had to embody the concept of the Hunter.

To the best of his ability, at least.

That statement sounded like an inspirational adage, but actually, there was nothing abstract or philosophical about it. Instead, it was strictly a matter of cold practicality.

At the level of power where Sunny had found himself, the physical battle between two creatures was merely an expression of the violent clash between their wills, their spirits… their essences.

An ultimate expression, true, but still only an outward one — no more than the tip of the iceberg.

So, channeling a concept that was both superior and in direct opposition to the essence of his enemy would help Sunny resist their Will better, empowering his own against the foe.

At least that was what he hoped and expected to happen — obviously, Sunny had never attempted a technique like that before. He had never even thought to think about such a technique before, let alone implement it.

Luckily, Sunny had several vital advantages as far as channeling the concept of the Hunter went.

First of all, he was a hunter — one of the most accomplished hunters of mankind, no less. The number of powerful Nightmare Creatures he had hunted was almost incalculable, and there were few people in the world more knowledgeable about how to stalk prey.

Secondly, he had witnessed the primordial hunters from the era of the Wolf once, a long time ago. Not only had he witnessed and battled them, but he had also learned their primal, ruthless battle style — he even used it when sparring with Morgan during the Southern Campaign, increasing his familiarity with the combat techniques of those prehistoric humans.

And lastly, Sunny was a master of Shadow Dance. That power of his allowed him to learn the essence of the enemy and assume their form... but even if there was no enemy for him to shadow — or if he did not dare to shadow anyone due to the fear of losing his unmoored, untethered self — he still had a great wealth of experience channeling the mindset and physicality of someone other than himself.

Of becoming someone else, even.

Shadows were a malleable sort, after all.

So, even if Sunny had never attempted to channel an opposing concept to gain an advantage in a battle of Wills with a superior enemy, he was still sufficiently confident that he could pull it off.

Flying down the slope of the volcano while the Wolf was distracted by the Obsidian Wasps, Sunny steeled his mind.

'Feel it…'

As Sunny lunged forward, the tip of his spear slicing the fabric of the world apart, he imagined himself as someone else. His imagination summoned a vision from the depths of his being, and submitting to his will, that vision came true.

He could almost feel it… he did feel it.

The chill of the early morning as he left his crude hut, its walls made of rough hide. The drops of dew trembling on the blades of grass. The smell of fresh blood in the air.

The cries of his kin, the ghastly sight of a body ravaged by beasts. The wolves had attacked his tribe in the night, stealing a life. The anger, the sorrow… the hunger.

The dark malice in the eyes of his fellow tribesmen, who looked at him for guidance. He was the best hunter among them, after all… their leader. Their chieftain.

The familiar weight of his spear as they headed toward the woods, the polished texture of its well-worn shaft, the wicked sharpness of its flint blade.

With this spear, he was going to kill the Wolf. He was going to kill it because it had dared to prey on his kin...

Because it had dared to hunt in his territory.

'Haaa…'

Sunny could feel his blood growing hotter, running faster. His eyes glinted with harsh, murderous light. His clear mind was engrossed with the channeled image, his movements turning sharp and economical, devoid of elegance or grace.

His Will had become different, as well. It changed to fit the essence of a fearless, ruthless Hunter.

In the next moment, Sunny was upon the Wolf. His spear lashed out, aiming for the beast's glowing, malevolent eyes, bringing with it the absolute finality of Death…

However, the Wolf was a fierce and cunning predator, as well. It was larger than Sunny, stronger than Sunny, faster than Sunny… it was hungrier than Sunny, too. It avoided the spear easily, leaping away and letting out a fearsome growl. The harrowing gaze of its three crimson eyes pierced him, penetrating into his very soul.

And suddenly, Sunny was little and weak. He was prey paralyzed by fear.

The ash billowed around him, and before the Wolf could lunge forward again, Sunny disappeared into the shadows and stepped out of them somewhere else, his ruthless spear piercing the Wolf's side.

"I…"

The ancient fiend whined and exploded into a storm of obliterating snow, retreating down the slope of the volcano to take shape again.

Sunny took a step forward and aimed his spear at the Cursed Demon once again. His lips twisted into a vicious grin.

"...am no one's prey."

The Wolf stared at him with madness and hatred for a split second, and then rushed forward in a hurricane of frenzied killing intent.

Sunny met the beast with the tip of his spear, and at the point where they clashed, the slope of the volcano fractured, countless tons of ash and rock sliding down into the sea of clouds.

A deafening thunderclap sent the clouds rippling, and the world quaked, hurt by the violence of the cataclysmic forces they had unleashed.

Neither Sunny nor the Wolf paid it any attention, though, having turned into a rolling, harrowing whirlwind of destruction. The two of them were intertwined in a dreadful dance of death, and nothing could withstand the lethal horror of their primal fury.

The towering volcano shuddered.

Chapter-2363: Shattered Rock

The mountains of Ariel's Game were titanic, towering much higher than any peak on Earth. They were impressively rugged and durable, as well, nearly indestructible — they had to be, considering that each was meant to become an arena for tremendously powerful beings.

And yet, in every battle Sunny had fought in this miniature realm, the mountain in question would inevitably be damaged. The two clashes with the Ice Hive and the dreadful battle against Abundance had resulted in chilling devastation.

But even that level of destruction paled in comparison to what was happening to the Shrine of Truth volcano now that six figures — three figures of Ash and three figures of Snow — had collided on its slopes.

The unimaginable scale of the unraveling calamity contrasted strangely against the dreamlike, glowing beauty of the gilded clouds below. The billowing black veil of ash above was illuminated by the golden glow of the rising sun, as well, contributing to the striking sight.

Between the beautiful white gold of the clouds and the elegant black gold of the ash, a scene of utter devastation was taking place.

On the southern slope, an immense mass of shattered rock had collapsed into the sea of clouds. The ground was torn by wide fractures, and rivers of lava were flowing down the weathered stone, spilling into the milky veil of swirling mist. The calamity was only just beginning, as well — Sunny and the Wolf had intertwined into an obliterating whirlwind, slowly moving toward the caldera as they left a trail of destruction in their wake.

On the northern slope, the Snow Wolves had reached the end of the glass bridge. This was the natural bottleneck they had to brave if they

wanted to step onto the ash-covered surface of the volcano, so that was where the phalanx of the Obsidian Wasps met them, scurrying forward to keep the enemy away from Slayer.

The Snow Wolves were quite cunning, though. Instead of colliding with the orderly battle formation of the insect-like shades, they turned into a rushing mass of snow and tried to bypass them — these Great Beasts were intelligent enough to know that the deadly archer hiding behind the Obsidian Wasps was the true threat, and so, they were determined to deal with Slayer first.

Their attempt had been spoiled, though, when the Wasps unfolded their translucent wings. A hurricane wind was raised by the beating of the obsidian wings, pushing the avalanche of snow back and arresting its advance.

The Snow Wolves had no choice but to assume corporeal forms and descend upon the shades in all their bestial fury. Scarlet eyes glowed fiercely as they bit into the glossy obsidian and shattered it with their paws, shattering several Wasps in an instant.

The Wasps were shades of Supreme Beasts, and there were more of them than there were Snow Wolves… however, shades were inherently weaker than their living counterparts, and these Great Beasts seemed far more powerful than each individual Crystal Wasp had been.

Still, the clash of so many beings of the Supreme and Great Ranks was nothing short of harrowing, producing almost as much violent destruction as the battle between Sunny and the Wolf did. The northern slope quaked almost as much as the southern one, and sharp pieces of stone flew in every direction like shrapnel.

Fissures and cracks appeared on the surface of the weathered rock, and the mountain seemed to groan. Its titanic edifice shuddered in pain.

The Obsidian Wasps seemed to disintegrate under the vicious assault of the Snow Wolves, but they fought with the tactical awareness and precision of a well-trained army unit — what they lacked in strength and ferocity, they made up for with seamless coordination and unity.

That was only possible because Sunny commanded them with an intricate level of control, of course…

One of the shades fell, shattered in the maw of the towering white wolf, but that gave two more just enough time to bite into the wolf's legs with their obsidian mandibles.

…And that, in turn, gave Slayer just enough time to draw her bow.

Now that the wolves were not rushing across the bridge but were instead bogged down in the crumbling phalanx of Obsidian Wasps, they were easy targets. A black arrow flashed through the air and sank into the wolf's frenzied eye — in the next moment, the entire upper half of the beast exploded into a bloody mess. The Great Beast fell down, its body crumbling into snow and ice.

On the eastern slope, the indomitable Clockwork Giant stepped onto the ash. Its stiff motions were measured and inevitable, and the world itself seemed to be bending around him, as if pushed by the crushing mass of the Cursed Beast's heavy presence.

The giant looked up, at the gargantuan body of Abundance that was already descending upon him like an avalanche of black flesh. His sword rose like the blade of a guillotine and fell down, cleaving through the enormous worm's neck.

Even the great sword's immense length was not enough to cut cleanly through it, though. And even though the cut delivered by the Clockwork Giant extended far beyond the brass blade of his sword, leaving a colossal scar on the face of the mountain, Abundance refused to be beheaded.

Instead, the giant was buried under the endless flesh of the worm shade. The volcano quaked and trembled from the cataclysmic impact, a hurricane of ash rising into the air as the weathered rock split and turned to dust.

The surface of the volcano broke, but the indomitable brass giant did not. Instead, it simply carved his way through the flesh of Abundance, emerging on the other side with mechanical, unfeeling malevolence.

As soon as it did, a sonic wave crashed into him violently, making the ancient metal rattle and pushing the Cursed Beast back.

High above, a dark dragon was soaring among the ash, its eyes shining with a beautiful silver light.

Kai was a Saint, and Saints were not supposed to battle Cursed Ones.

However, he was empowered by the boon of ash and emboldened by Sunny's own deathly will.

So, today, he could achieve things he would not have been able to achieve otherwise.

Like, for example…

Meaningfully affecting a Sacred shade with the mystical power of his voice.

No sooner than the Clockwork Giant staggered back into the coils of Abundance, an eerily beautiful voice thundered from above:

"CRUSH HIM!"

And suddenly, the giant found it much harder to escape from the endlessness of the black worm than before.

The mountain shuddered, breaking apart, as the Cursed abominations and the Sacred shade clashed on its slope, the beautiful dragon unleashing the destructive power of its songs on the shattered slope.

The sun crawled slowly from behind the horizon.

Chapter-2364: Wolfbane

Sunny was bleeding.

It was a strange and unpleasant thing, but he could not stem the flow of blood from his wounds.

His side was torn apart, and his forehead was cut. Blood was flowing down his face, stinging his eye. The world had turned half-red, and the shaft of his spear was slippery in his hand.

Of course, the smell of blood only made him hunger to kill his enemy more.

The only thing he regretted was that the Wolf did not shed blood, as well, despite being cut and mangled by his spear — the vile thing was a corpse, after all, and corpses rarely bled.

Sunny himself was not a corpse, but he was not in the habit of bleeding either. Today was the exception to the rule, though, because of who his enemy was. The Wolf was the epitome of a predator, and therefore, everything that it hunted was prey… was supposed to be prey.

And it was the nature of the Wolf's prey to bleed.

To be mangled, torn, and devoured.

Sunny found himself struggling to push against the confines of being prey — of having this concept be forced upon him by the Will of the Wolf — and therefore, Blood Weave was cowering in fear of the malevolent spirit.

Of course, he was not bleeding as much as a normal person would — if he did, he would have turned into a corpse himself already. His Will was resisting the Cursed Demon fiercely, and to great success.

That was why Sunny was still alive, that was why the Wolf could not move freely on the slope of the volcano, and that was why the dreadful fiend had more wounds on its body than Sunny did.

And the reason why Sunny's Will was so effective against the Will of a being that was far more ancient, far more powerful, and far more terrifying than him was, in large part, because he did not wield it blindly.

He wielded it as a swordsman would a sharp blade, with finesse and precision. He had donned the essence of the Hunter, too, making that weapon uniquely suited to fight against the Wolf.

Sunny pierced the Cursed Demon with his spear, scorched it with lava, and set his Obsidian Wasps upon it like hunting dogs. He poisoned its soul with Death Will, smothered it with ash, and chained it with manifested shadows.

He broke its fangs and shattered its bones, slamming the giant Wolf into the slope of the volcano with the power of a Supreme Titan. He made sure that every step the vile fiend made inside his Domain cost more than it could afford to pay.

And pay it would…

"Argh!"

Barely blocking the swipe of an enormous paw with the shaft of his spear, Sunny was tossed back.

The Wolf moved with speed which made the concept of time meaningless. The world — those parts of it that were not pushed by Sunny's own will — seemed still. Flakes of ash were frozen in the air, and fountains of lava had turned into glowing statues.

The sun stood motionless, half-hidden behind the horizon.

Feeling the iron taste of blood on his tongue, Sunny wanted to laugh.

He had wanted to hold out until the dawn exhausted itself, hadn't he?

That hope seemed senseless now.

At the speed with which he and the Wolf were moving, the dawn might as well have been eternal.

Landing on the jagged rocks, Sunny slid on the ash and righted himself with the butt of his spear.

The Wolf was already upon him, and there was no time to dodge.

'You damn grotesque monstrosity…'

Sunny did not have time to dodge, and he did not even have time to dive into the shadows. So, he did not even try. Instead, a split second — whatever that meant now — before the Wolf's inescapable jaws snapped shut across his torso, he simply turned into a shadow himself.

It did not matter for a Cursed Demon whether its enemy was tangible or intangible, so Sunny kept himself manifested as a clump of matter — a formless mass of darkness that was pushed by the fiend's snout like fabric. Instead of biting him in two, the Wolf simply got entangled in him, carrying both of them hundreds of meters up the slope with its lunge.

Then, Sunny imbued his formless body with the weight of a mountain, pushing the Wolf down.

His spear was hopelessly beyond reach now… but that was alright.

Because there were a hundred perfectly fine spears sticking out of the creature's back, their ancient flint blades still retaining their deadly edges.

A hundred hands rose from the formless mass of darkness entangling the Cursed Demon and grasped the shafts of the ancient spears, tearing them out of the Wolf's hide and then plunging them back with vicious strength.

The Wolf let out a harrowing, soul-destroying howl.

And tore into Sunny's formless body, shredding it apart with its fangs and its claws.

The pain was blinding.

Everything about Sunny — his body, his soul, his spirit — was being torn apart.

But he simply laughed, continuing to stab the frenzied beast with the hundred flint spears. Some of them broke, but more remained intact, piercing deeper and deeper into the fiend's flesh…

More still plunged into its shadow, ripping it to shreds.

The Wolf fell and rolled, crushing Sunny under its weight.

Both of them were receiving grievous wounds, but Sunny knew that the Wolf would easily outlast him. There would be only one winner in this reckless exchange of mortal wounds, and it was not going to be the human.

The volcano shuddered once more, another section of the southern slope becoming utterly pulverized and broken.

In fact, most of the southern slope was simply gone, by now.

The eastern slope looked better, but not by much. Abundance was on the verge of collapsing there, and Kai was battering the indestructible brass giant with sonic blasts to buy the gargantuan worm a little bit more time.

Slayer had managed to slay a few more Snow Wolves on the northern slope, but most of the Obsidian Wasps were already gone. She had to abandon her bow and unsheath her blades, slicing open the throat of a lunging Beast as she dove beneath it.

The terrain of the volcano had completely changed, the very landscape being reshaped by the terrifying battle.

It almost felt like the entire mountain was ready to collapse.

Drowning in pain, bloodlust, and fury, Sunny thought coldly…

'It should be time, shouldn't it?'

He would have smiled if he had a mouth.

The spear, after all, was not the only weapon of a hunter.

The hunter's best tool was a trap.

Chapter-2365: Lured Into a Trap

Sunny was wounded.

The Wolf was wounded more.

It was because Sunny was defending his Domain while the Wolf was invading it. It was also because Sunny was especially tenacious, while the Wolf was simply ferocious.

Plus, Sunny fought with a spear, the purpose of which was to keep the fangs of the enemy away from his body. The Wolf, however, fought with its body — so, naturally, its body had received more damage than Sunny's own.

But that was not going to last much longer.

At the end of the day — even though the time seemed frozen and the day showed no sign of ever progressing, let alone coming to an end — Sunny was still much weaker than the Cursed Demon. He could have defeated it in combat, perhaps, if there were no other figures attacking the Shrine of Truth at the same time. But as things stood, his temporary advantage was swiftly coming to an end.

Soon enough, the balance of power between them would be broken and reversed, and when that happened, Sunny was going to be ripped apart by the fangs of the dreadful Wolf. He would become its meal.

So, there was no point in continuing their calamitous fight.

Luckily, he had accounted for his lack of strength in advance and prepared a trap.

The trap he had built was quite a simple one, but also quite devious. While designing his grand enchantment, Sunny knew that he was going to be weaker than his enemies… even his sorcery would be

weaker than them, no matter how intricate of a weave he wove.

So, he needed to borrow power from somewhere to deal with his enemies.

But where would he borrow power to kill Cursed abominations?

After thinking for some time…

Sunny had decided to borrow that power from the Cursed abominations themselves.

There had been no time to create a truly complicated spell, but the one he wanted to enchant the mountain with was relatively simple. All Sunny had to do was scale it to titanic proportions and invent a way to etch the spellweave into a towering volcano instead of a Memory.

The enchantments he wove belonged to a shield he had received as one of the Dream Tournament rewards courtesy of its sponsor, the Great Clan Valor, only to use it later to kill one of the Valor Knights in the Night Temple. Both Sunny and Saint had used that shield well in the Kingdom of Hope — later, it was inherited by Quentin, whom it served faithfully in Antarctica and the second Nightmare.

The gallant Master was still using it, in fact.

That shield was no other than Patient Avenger, and its enchantments were called [Burning Heart] and [Cold Steel].

[Burning Heart] Enchantment Description: "This shield can store a portion of fire damage it receives to augment another weapon of its wielder or unleash a devastating shockwave."

[Cold Steel] Enchantment Description: "This shield can store a portion of impact damage it receives to augment another weapon of its wielder or unleash an immolating wave of fire."

…As Sunny had already noted, the mountains of Ariel's Game were incredibly sturdy. And yet, they were on the verge of toppling after each titanic battle, since the forces unleashed by the clashing figures were simply too terrible. How could they not be, when literal gods

were fighting on the weathered slopes?

So, Sunny had enchanted a fire-breathing mountain in a way that allowed it to absorb the damage it received, store it… and then unleash it in one harrowing, world-ending conflagration.

To be precise, he had enchanted the volcano to incinerate everything and anyone touching its surface.

'Haaa…'

As the Wolf shredded Sunny's formless body ferociously, repeatedly slamming it into the fractured, crumbling slope, he exhaled slowly.

'Am I not a genius? No, but really?'

He would have laughed if he could.

Any other enchantment would have needed time to collect charge, which would have doomed Sunny because of how fast the battle was progressing. However, the enchantments derived from the Patient Avenger he had woven into the mountain did not depend on time… they only depended on the amount of damage dealt to the mountain.

The faster the Wolf, the pack of its lesser kin, the Clockwork Giant — as well as Sunny, Slayer, Kai, Abundance, and the Obsidian Wasps — moved, the fiercer their battles were, the more damage they dealt to the volcano. And the more damage was dealt to the volcano, the more of it the volcano absorbed, hastening the moment when the enchantment would reach critical mass.

'It's time, now. I think...'

Sunny was ready to spring his trap on the wounded Wolf.

The formless, hundred-handed mass of darkness tore all of the flint spears from the body of the Cursed Demon, tearing its white fur.

And then… it simply dissolved into the shadows.

Sunny sent himself to the Shrine of Truth.

At the same time, Slayer was pulled into the shadows, as well, appearing next to him in a stagger. If the murderous Shadow was surprised by suddenly being taken out of the fight, she did not show it — if anything, she seemed dissatisfied by the fact that Sunny had robbed her of the chance to kill more wolves.

Kai had just landed on the shattered rock a split second ago to avoid a world-severing strike of the Clockwork Giant's sword. He was pulled into the shadows, too, and there was suddenly a giant dragon in the vast hall of the Shrine.

The surviving Obsidian Wasps and the shade of Abundance were dismissed, leaving only the Snow abominations on the slopes of the volcano.

That was quite a dangerous situation — not only because the enemies could converge freely on the caldera, but also because the Wolf could unite with the pack of Great Beasts, regaining its greatest strength.

But, of course, Sunny was not planning to give the abominations a chance to meet.

Assuming his human form and falling to his knees, awash in blood, he grinned wildly.

And sent a pulse of essence into the scorched floor of the ancient Shrine, activating his spell.

Chapter-2366: Grand Enchantment

"Brace yourselves!"

Slayer sank one of her swords into the floor of the temple, while Kai crouched low to the floor. The sight of a crouching dragon was strangely magnificent, but also slightly comical — Sunny had no time to laugh, though.

He could feel an abyss of shadow essence raging somewhere deep below him, the colossal weave he had etched into the mountain coming alive at his touch. The pulse he had sent spread through the intricate web of essence strings running through the vast network of tunnels Abundance had created, and then…

The entire mountain moved.

Some distance away, on its southern slope, the Wolf had been given no time to reach the caldera.

On the northern slope, the Snow Wolves were still disoriented by the sudden disappearance of their enemies.

On the eastern slope, the unflappable brass giant was taking a step.

The ash covering the slopes of the volcano suddenly ignited with a soft glow, as if the rock beneath it was shining.

The soft glow swiftly turned into blinding, incandescent radiance.

Then, the ash was incinerated, dissolving into the searing light.

Sunny belatedly remembered his own advice and looked for something to take hold of.

'Damn…'

The shadows rose to envelop the Shrine of Truth, and the platform it was resting on, into an impenetrable cocoon.

The world turned white.

And absolutely silent.

Outside, the entire volcano suddenly ignited with pure white light, shining brighter than the rising sun. The incandescent white mountain was like a finger pointing at heaven, carved from peerless white jade — the golden radiance of dawn paled in comparison to its brilliance, seeming dim and bleak.

Then came the heat.

The ash was annihilated. The shattered rocks were annihilated, as well. The rivers of lava were turned into clouds of incandescent plasma. The plasma… was turned into something else, something unknown.

Divine flame, perhaps. The primordial soup of creation.

Creation was just the other side of destruction, though, if Nephis was to be believed.

And Sunny was about to witness that destruction with his own two eyes…

Metaphorically speaking, of course, since he was on his knees in the darkness of the temple, with his eyes closed. There were no shadows left anywhere on the volcano, either, so he could not even sense the dreadful majesty of the destruction he had unleashed.

Outside the range of his senses, a wave of unfathomable heat was unleashed from the slopes of the volcano.

The veil of ash above it ignited like a starlit sky, then dissolved into the blinding light.

The glass bridges melted.

The sea of clouds around the mountain evaporated — luckily, he was not there to see what was hidden below.

He did hear something, however…

[You have slain an enemy.]

[You have slain an enemy.]

[You have slain…]

The enchantment was aimed at anything that touched the surface of the volcano, which meant that the Shrine itself, which stood on a hanging platform suspended above the main shaft, was the only safe spot. However, the scale of the unleashed power was far too great for it to remain unscathed.

As an annihilating heatwave radiated outward from the slopes of the volcano, making the atmosphere boil and causing the snow on the mountains dozens of kilometers away to melt, some of it reached the cocoon of shadows enveloping the Shrine, as well.

The shadows burned.

But that… was only the beginning.

Because the volcano was melting like a candle from its own heat. The damage dealt to it by the first activation of the grandiose enchantment was absorbed, as well.

And then released as a devastating shockwave.

'D—damn!'

The towering volcano shuddered.

And then, it exploded.

It simply ceased to exist — the part of it above the vanquished clouds, at least. Deep fractures covered its melting slopes, and in the next instance, the slopes disintegrated into a swiftly expanding mass of burning rock and boiling lava.

The fiery debris rained down, some leaving scorch marks on the surrounding mountains.

The chains that held up the Shrine had been melting, and now, they snapped.

The platform plummeted down.

Sunny had made himself as heavy as he could, but still, he was almost thrown into the air.

[...You have slain an enemy.]

The cocoon of shadows was pulverized by the tidal wave of sound that arrived in the wake of the harrowing explosion. Sunny was suddenly both blind and deaf, barely cognizant of where up and down were.

By the time the Shrine of Truth crashed into something solid, the soundwave reached the surrounding mountains, stripping them of the remaining snow and sending cracks running through their slopes.

There would have been a secondary eruption of heat, and a secondary explosion… but now that the entire upper part of the volcano was no more, the enchantment Sunny had woven into it was gone, too.

The Snow Wolves were dead.

The Cursed Demon — the Wolf — was dead, too. It had already been wounded, and while it did survive the initial wave of heat, the following shockwave tore what little remained of its scorched body apart.

A god died just like that, slain with the help of its own strength by the trap of a cunning hunter.

The Clockwork Giant, though… was still alive.

But he did not stay alive much longer.

His brass breastplate had melted in the heat, but then restored itself.

The following explosion, though, sent him flying high into the sky.

He plummeted down like an incandescent comet, seemingly impervious to all harm. Soon, however, his shining metal body reached a point where clouds would have been before.

Something grotesque moved far below, then, reaching up to grab him and pull him down.

Soon enough, the sinister construct was no more.

The clouds slowly flowed from afar, repairing the vast rift in the torn sea.

The melting glass bridges finally cooled, turning into strange and beautiful sculptures.

Where the towering volcano had once stood, only a melted stump of it remained. White mist washed against the glowing rock, turning into steam.

The entirety of the broken volcano had turned into a giant bowl, filled to the brim with lava.

And in the middle of the fiery lake, a lonely platform floated on the lava, supporting the weight of a scorched temple.

Inside, suffering from unbearable heat, Sunny slowly rose from the floor and looked at one of the two altars with a dazed expression.

There, three jade figurines had appeared at some point, as if summoned by magic.

He smiled, causing the crust of baked blood covering one side of his face to crack.

His voice was hoarse and unsteady:

"I... I think… I think we won."

Chapter-2367: Lake of Lava

"Your wounds are quite severe…"

Sunny was sprawled on the floor, his breathing labored. Kai had assumed his human form and was standing above him, a concerned expression on his face — his worry was appreciated, but entirely misplaced, since there was no real need to fret.

The wounds… looked worse than they were. Surely, the sight of mangled flesh, with bone visible in the deeper tears, was disconcerting. And his soul was hurt, too. But Sunny was Supreme, after all — a bit of damage like that was not going to kill him. In fact, these wounds were going to heal swiftly.

But not swiftly enough to be healed completely before the next battle, which was unfortunate.

The Obsidian Wasps he had lost would not repair themselves in time, either.

The spell he had woven went up in flames with the volcano.

Sunny let out a sigh.

Really, he had suffered quite a loss in this battle.

"Well… I did fight a Cursed Demon, you know."

The battle against the Wolf had been truly frightful. Now that it was behind him, Sunny could truly appreciate the fact that he had somehow managed to last this long against a fallen deity of that Class.

Kai himself was battered and exhausted, but most of all, he seemed bewildered.

"A Cursed Demon… yes. I still can't believe that you killed it so quickly."

Sunny let out a hoarse laugh, then winced and thought better of it.

"Quickly? It might have felt quick to you, but I had been wrestling that fiend for an eternity. It wasn't quick at all, far from it."

Time itself had fallen victim to their battle, so measuring how long exactly he had been trading blows with the Wolf was a fool's errand.

Groaning, he turned his head and looked at the three jade figurines standing on the altar, as if wanting to make sure that the feral fiend was truly dead. Then, Sunny sighed again.

"You've done well yourself, though. How many Saints are there who can boast battling a Cursed Beast?"

Kai smiled.

"Not too many, I hope."

By which he meant that he hoped that as few Saints as possible would find themself in a position to fight a Cursed abomination, of course, not that there would be few who could match his glory.

'That guy...'

Kai's gaze shifted back to Sunny's bloodied form. Kneeling beside him, the archer spoke firmly:

"Heal."

And, obeying his command, both Sunny's body and soul began to heal faster. It was not quite as effective as what an actual healer could do, especially not a Transcendent one, but still quite miraculous.

Sunny let out a weak laugh.

"Wow. You are a real magician."

Then, he closed his eyes.

"I'll... rest now, if you don't mind. I am a bit… spent…"

As Kai nodded tiredly, beads of sweat running down his soot-covered face, Sunny released his manifestation and turned back into a shadow. Since his soul was wounded as well, not just his physical form, the pain did not disappear — but at least he did not have to feel the damn heat anymore.

'Damnation. Why couldn't I have become the Snow Tyrant, instead?'

Enjoying the cool embrace of shadows, Sunny slowly collected his thoughts. The battle might have been over, but that did not mean that the Death Game was. He had to start preparing for the enemy's next move.

'First things first.'

Now that dawn had run its course and the sun was climbing the vast dome of the sky, Sunny allowed his shadow sense to spread across what remained of the volcano.

There wasn't much left, really — just an enormous stone bowl containing a lake of lava, and the Shrine of Truth floating in its middle. Sunny did not try to explore how deep the lake went, since that would mean catching a glimpse of what hid beneath the clouds. For now, it was enough for him to know what the next battlefield he would have to fight on looked like.

He was sufficiently certain that all three of the Snow abominations were dead, but it was a relief to confirm that no trace of them was left.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, coming to terms with the fact that he had, indeed, won.

He had slain the Wolf.

That primordial fiend was the most powerful enemy he had killed to date. The battle against the ancient fallen deity had without a doubt been chilling and tremendously dreadful, and yet it… it had not been

as desperate as Sunny expected it to be.

But that was simply because he was too used to utter desperation. In truth, the battle had ended the way it had because he entered it sufficiently prepared. He had understood the nature of the enemy and devised a strategy according to that knowledge, executing the plan splendidly.

The beast had died in the hunter's trap.

And now, no trace of the beast remained.

Sunny groaned.

Actually, he would have preferred it if some trace of his enemies had remained. The wolves seemed more like wraiths than actual beasts, which meant that eating their meat would have probably not been an option anyway… but what troubled him more was that there were no soul shards left in the wake of the three Snow figures, either.

They had probably drowned in lava, or maybe had been outright destroyed with the Nightmare Creatures. Sunny had never witnessed soul shards being destroyed with their hosts before, but then again, he had never witnessed such a battle either.

The cataclysm summoned into existence by his sorcery had unleashed truly profane power… so, there was no point to be surprised.

He still felt despondent at the loss of four Sacred soul shards, though.

'How regretful.'

Sunny allowed himself to feel disappointed for a while, then pushed his thoughts in a more productive direction.

It was not like he had gained nothing from the battle, after all.

The first benefit was quite obvious — it was that he was still alive. Kai and Slayer were also in one piece, and even the shade of Abundance had not been destroyed completely, meaning that it would be able to participate in the next siege.

The second benefit was the three jade figurines standing on the altar of the Shrine of Truth. They were the very reason Sunny had driven his companions all the way to the Shrine, in the first place — by sacrificing them, they would be able to grow much stronger, and therefore much better suited to face the next battle, and every Death Game battle after that.

And lastly, there was the third benefit as well.

It was what Sunny had learned from his battle against the Wolf.

That one… that one an unexpected boon, and one he was most curious about.

Chapter-2368: Wrong Order

Sunny had made the decision to channel the essence of a concept opposite to that of the Wolf in the spur of the moment. However, it had not been a baseless idea.

Rather, he had come up with that countermeasure after coming to understand his enemy deeply. Learning the very essence of his enemies was one of the things he did best, after all, having shadowed countless humans and Nightmare Creatures in his life.

Sunny had learned that skill while mastering the first step of Shadow Dance. In the beginning, it was all about glimpsing the secrets of his enemy's battle style… but just as Shadow Dance had outgrown the confines of merely being a combat technique, its purview had expanded greatly, as well.

Sunny had long become capable of sensing the flow of essence through his enemies. But after fighting the Wolf, he realized that he was also capable of sensing the enemy's Will — not just its impact, but also its affinity.

Understanding the nature of the Wolf was one part reasonable deduction and one part being able to sense what its ferocious spirit truly was.

'This is…'

It was strange.

Sunny felt that he had stumbled onto something profound.

Channeling the concept of the Hunter had helped him survive the fierce assault of the Cursed Demon — perhaps it was the very reason he had managed to survive until the volcano absorbed enough damage to produce a powerful enough explosion. And he did not

delude himself into thinking that just anyone could have been able to accomplish the same.

That last part was especially important. Nephis possessed a singularly powerful Will, but her Will was firm and indomitable. It was like a sword that refused to break and demanded that everything else break under its blade. Her uncompromising spirit strived to be absolute.

Sunny's own will, however, was subtle and insidious. Nephis described it as a weapon that only knew how to kill, and there was certainly truth to her words — but that slaying weapon was flexible and versatile, willing to assume any form it needed to kill the enemy.

Just like shadows were inherently formless, and therefore willing to assume any form.

That was the reason why Sunny was uniquely positioned to channel any foreign concept… which meant that it was something that only he could do, or at least do so effectively. That ability suited him perfectly.

So perfectly, in fact, that he wondered if he was meant to discover it.

Not in the grand way of being fated or influenced into stumbling upon it, though, more so in the way of that ability being the next step on the path he had been walking all along.

Was this… the sixth step of Shadow Dance?

'I think it is.'

Sunny felt that it was, and that was why he was so bewildered.

After all, he had not mastered the fifth step yet.

'How… novel.'

This was the first time his understanding of Shadow Dance had become greater than his actual mastery of it. Before, he had always stumbled in the darkness, seeking epiphanies and revelations. Usually, the act of fathoming the secret of the next step meant mastering it. But this time, things were different.

The fourth step of Shadow Dance allowed him to assume the forms of his enemies. The fifth step was supposed to allow him to shadow their powers and Attributes, as well… he had even discovered a way to master it by fusing with his Shadows and augmenting those of his Domain — humans and shades both.

However, Sunny had never gone through the actual process of doing so. That was because by the time he learned the secret of the Fifth Step, his fate had already been lost, and his True Name was gone.

Without the True Name to anchor his self, it was too dangerous to delve so deeply into the essence of other beings and assume their form. He could easily lose himself forever, forgetting how to return to his own form in body, mind, and soul.

So, the fifth step of Shadow Dance remained beyond his reach.

It had remained unreachable for so long, it seemed, that both Sunny and his enemies had grown in power greatly. And now, having failed to master it, Sunny was already discovering the secrets of the step after that.

'So…'

Was what he had done in the battle against the Wolf dangerous?

Sunny felt bitterly reluctant to admit it, but he knew that it was. The absence of a True Name was once again holding him back. Everything had gone smoothly this time, but that was only because the concept Sunny had channeled was not inherently foreign to his own spirit — it was the concept of the Hunter, after all, and Sunny was himself a greatly accomplished hunter.

But what if the concept he had to channel was completely alien to him?

Would he be able to embody it? Sunny knew that he would, with enough practice. He knew how malleable everything about him was.

But would he be able to return from channeling a concept that was in conflict with his own spirit?

Sunny was not sure about that.

What about channeling a hundred concepts, each of them vastly different and in opposition to each other?

Well, that sounded like a perfect way to fall into complete lunacy… and Sunny already had precious little sanity left.

He was already afraid of losing himself, or at the very least his humanity, to the nature of being Supreme. Of becoming something he despised on the path to Apotheosis.

'This feels terrible. Damn!'

Sunny felt like he had found a shiny weapon... only to discover that he was incapable of picking it up.

Like he was denied something he was owed.

He stayed nestled in the shadows, hidden in the darkness of the Shrine of Truth, unseen and motionless. His wounded soul was once again being ravaged by the scathing feeling of regret.

If only he had chosen differently… if only he had not surrendered to his desperate wish… if only he had not betrayed his friends, and still possessed his True Name…

But Sunny knew that these thoughts were meaningless. There was no way to turn back time, and even if he could… regret would have been eating him alive all the same, just for a different reason.

For a far worse reason.

No matter how much he regretted what he did, it was better than regretting something that he had never dared to do.

Which was not to say…

That he could not correct his mistake and be rid of all this regret altogether.

All he had to do was make a choice and get his fate back.

'I've already killed a Cursed Demon, now.'

Killing a Cursed Terror did not seem so impossible anymore.

But Sunny still had doubts.

…Sometime later, he emerged from the shadows and rubbed his face, chasing the uninvited thoughts away. He had no time to ponder these difficult matters now, because there were too many enemies he had to kill.

'Right. On to the next point of the agenda…'

His gaze fell on the three jade figurines.

Chapter-2369: Fine Thread

Once again, Sunny gave Kai and Slayer one jade Beast figure each, to be sacrificed to the Shrine of Truth. Everything happened as it had happened before — after being placed on the altar, the figures turned to ash and were absorbed by them. A second ring was added to the one already encircling their soul cores…

Well, a soul core in the case of Kai. In the case of Slayer, though, Sunny was not entirely sure what to call the radiant ember at the heart of her unfathomably dark self. A shard of a core in a shadow of a soul, perhaps.

Looking at it, he remembered what Eurys had told him once. That his Shadows were not entirely complete… if there was a way to complete, though, Sunny did not know what it was. Or if there was a need or a benefit to completing them.

All he knew was that Slayer had been complete before being slain by his blade, but now, she was a part of him — just like the rest of his Shadows were.

'Another mystery to solve… one day.'

The second ring of ash made Kai and Slayer much stronger. It also allowed Sunny to imbue them with far more of his Will — enough so that he would not worry about sending either of them into a battle with Great Nightmare Creatures.

As for the Cursed Ones, well… Sunny himself was not too confident when facing those. With how much his companions were empowered by his Will, however, they would at least be able to help him take the Cursed Ones down. Their arrows would not bounce off the flesh of those fallen gods without leaving a scratch.

'That's something.'

That was quite a boon, actually. The shadows of the Wolf and its pack were resting in his soul now, as well — as long as Sunny could summon the shade of the Sacred Demon into existence, his small army was going to become tremendously more powerful.

Still…

He studied the third jade figure — the Snow Demon figure — which was left laying on his palm.

He wanted to become stronger, as well. Five of the Snow Tyrant's abominations had already fallen by his hand, including three Cursed Ones… but instead of making him feel secure, the experience of those battles only made Sunny feel trepidation.

The battle against the Wolf had been a close one. He had triumphed in the end, and it was quite a spectacular victory. And yet, nobody knew better than Sunny how easily he could have lost his life instead.

How was he going to fight a Cursed Devil?

There was a qualitative jump in power between Monsters and Demons, because Demons were sapient. But there was just as significant of a jump between Demons and Devils, because Devils wielded profane and terrifying powers. What was he going to do when a fallen deity unleashed its powers against him?

What if that deity was accompanied not by Beasts, but by Monsters? Or even creatures of a higher Class?

So… Sunny was not going to refuse more power.

That said, he also wanted to learn the truth.

Whatever boost he could receive from sacrificing the Snow Demon figure to the Shrine of Truth was bound to be if not insignificant, then at least marginal. Kai and Slayer could borrow his Will with the help of ash, but what would Sunny borrow? At most, his strength would somewhat increase.

Knowledge, on the other hand, was the origin of all power. It was none other than Weaver themself who had said it… so, learning a

useful truth could actually give him far more power than sacrificing a figure would.

Or not.

'I've decided.'

Sunny sighed.

"I think I am going to toss this thing into the lava."

Kai, who had been drawing his bow to get used to his newfound strength, glanced at him briefly.

"Whatever you think is best."

Then, he lowered the bow and looked at him properly. There was a strange expression on Kai's face — not quite a frown, but something similar to it.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Kai remained silent for a bit, then shook his head.

"No, nothing. It's just… that Demon. Did you see anything strange when fighting it?"

Sunny blinked a few times.

"That Demon was an eldritch god. Everything about it was strange. What do you mean exactly?"

Kai hesitated a little, then shrugged.

"It's just… I think I saw something, when I was fighting the brass giant. Helping that worm of yours fight him, I mean."

His expression soured a little at the mention of Abundance, prompting Sunny to grin.

"What is this I'm sensing? A bit of repulsion toward Abundance?

Come on now, Kai, it is just a worm… a truly enormous, sacred worm. Actually, it is practically a wyrm. Dragons and wyrms are kin, so doesn't that sort of make the two of you siblings?"

Kai shuddered.

"No worm is a sibling of mine, thank you very much! Please don't say such terrible things, Sunny!"

Sunny laughed.

"Well, alright. No need to be so offended. In any case, what was it that you saw? We both know how special your sight is, Kai, so don't make the mistake of underestimating it."

Sunny was higher in Rank than Kai and vastly more powerful, but that did not mean that he was superior to his friend in all regards. In terms of perception, for example, Kai was far ahead of him — or anyone else, really. So, Sunny was inclined to take whatever Kai had seen seriously.

Kai lingered for a while, frowning, then said finally:

"During the battle… a few times, I thought I saw something glistening in the air behind the giant. But every time I tried to take a closer look, there was nothing there. I would decide that I saw wrong, only to be distracted by that shine again later. Eventually…"

He paused for a moment, then added:

"I thought that I noticed a silver thread extending from his back and disappearing into the distance. It was so thin and fine as to almost be non-existent, so even I could not see it clearly. Then, it was gone in the blink of an eye, so I can't be sure that I did not simply imagine the whole thing. The battle was quite hectic, after all."

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at him.

"Didn't you say that there was something strange about all the Snow abominations? Could they have strange threads extending from their backs as well?"

Sunny himself had not seen or sensed any threads. But if these strings were as infinitely thin as Kai had said, there would be no shadows left by them on the ground — and therefore, there would have been nothing for him to sense.

It sounded quite suspicious, though, summoning imagery of puppets being pulled by puppeteer's strings. The Snow Tyrant had to be controlling its figures somehow, so Sunny responded to that imagery strongly.

Kai shrugged.

"I don't know."

Sunny let out a sigh.

"...Keep an eye out for these threads in the days to come, then. If you do notice another, let me know."

With that, he headed away and left the temple.

Walking over to the edge of the platform, Sunny looked across the lake of lava. The heat here was almost unbearable, so he did not loiter around and directly tossed the jade figure into the lake.

As it was swallowed by bubbling lava, he took a few steps back and sat down.

'Let's see…'

Sunny concentrated on the questions he wanted answered the most, hoping that it would affect what truth he received this time.

How had the world ended? How had the gods died? What had Weaver…

Then, suddenly, he was somewhere else.

Chapter-2370: A Cruel Fate

The mountains had collapsed, creating a vast valley. The green slopes had turned into a brown desert of crushed rock… and now, the desert turned into a red river.

The blood-red cloaks of the imperial soldiers were like a crimson tide as they marched forward, sunlight glistening on the tips of their spears.

Far above the sea of marching warriors, a hawk was gliding on the gentle winds. It opened its beak and let out a cry, then moved its wings to fly away. It was just in time — a moment later, a golden arrow flashed past it, tearing the sky apart.

The hawk folded its wings and plummeted down, then spread them again to glide and escape the cold gaze of the unseen archer.

It flew away, across the rolling hills of olive trees and beautiful cities. Across the wine-colored sea with islands where vibrant flowers bloomed among white rocks. Across deep forests teeming with wildlife, where holy beasts rested in the shade of emerald canopies, deep quarries where precious marble was being mined, and tranquil shrines.

Across a peaceful realm that was about to be devoured by the jaws of War.

Eventually, the hawk reached a vast city that sprawled around a tall hill and landed in the courtyard of a humble manor, turning into a woman who wore a deer hide around her shoulders. Her olive skin was covered in sweat, and her breathing was labored, her face showing fatigue from having crossed such a great distance in such a short time.

"My lady!"

Handmaidens rushed to offer her water and fresh fruit, their eyes gleaming with awe and veneration.

The woman drank deeply from a beautifully painted amphora, then waved the young girls away. When she looked at them, her own eyes became full of sorrow for a brief moment.

Then, she hid her sorrow away.

"No time for that. Where is the prince? I must see him."

The handmaidens looked at each other, prompting her to frown.

"What is it?"

They looked in the direction of the hill, where an ancient temple stood, its white pillars weathered from the passage of time.

"It is the Oracle… you have been summoned. The prince, as well."

The woman sighed bitterly, then wiped the water off her lips.

"Now they are speaking, huh?"

She closed her eyes for a few moments, then straightened and looked at the young handmaidens one more time.

The girls giggled in embarrassment under her gaze, which made the woman's face harden. Turning away, she left without looking back.

The atmosphere in the temple was strange when she arrived. It stood empty most of the time, but now, there were people.

She recognized most of them...

There was a noble young man with calm and wise eyes. A boy with red hair — an unusual color in this land. A scholarly woman with a long black braid, her graceful beauty both subtle and bewitching.

There was also a tall warrior with broad shoulders, his towering height making the others seem puny. A slender man in elegant clothes who looked like a sculptor. A ship captain whose rough skin

had turned bronze in the sun, his eyes the same color as the sea. A blind poet whose songs were renowned across the realm. A woman who was either a priestess or a courtesan, or maybe both…

Each and every one of them, except the boy, was famous for one reason or another. Some of them were immensely powerful, while some were only slightly so... but all were outstanding.

All in all, it was a strange crowd of people.

As the woman wearing a deerskin around her shoulders arrived, there were now nine of them.

She looked at the gathering with a frown, but chose to say nothing.

The warrior spoke, instead, his booming voice echoing under the roof of the ancient temple:

"What news?"

The woman answered curtly.

"It is as we expected. The imperials are already on the march."

The warrior clicked his tongue.

"Curses! I should be gathering citizens into an army, not wasting my time here."

The noble young man looked at him calmly.

"...We were summoned."

Despite the difference in their height, the tall man seemed taken aback. He lowered his head.

"I am sorry, my prince. I spoke out of turn."

Soon, they were ushered into the inner sanctum of the temple. There, three figures sat behind a veil.

A young girl, a mature woman, and an old hag…

All three of them were blind, but saw much more than anyone with sight could.

They were the Oracle.

The young man kneeled before them.

"I, Eurys, greet you. We have arrived to answer your call."

The three women smiled and answered, their three voices becoming one:

"Greetings, brother!"

"Greetings, my son."

"Greetings, child."

The young man — Prince Eurys — took a deep breath.

"Our homeland is in grave peril, oh Oracle. And so, we beseech you… please, show us how to save our realm."

The young girl seemed sad. The woman stayed motionless. The old hag laughed.

"Have you finally learned manners, naughty child?"

The young man stayed silent for a few moments, then repeated his words:

"We beseech you."

The young girl moved, as if wanting to cross the veil and touch him, but the woman held her back. She turned her head to face the kneeling prince, and then said calmly:

"I am sorry, my son. But that is not why we called you."

The eight people staying behind the prince paled, while the prince himself pursed his lips.

The three women continued, their voices fusing with each other.

"This land of ours…"

"Cannot be saved."

"The tapestry of fate is vast, but it is also cruel."

"The empire won't be stopped."

"Our cities…"

"Will burn."

"Our people will be enslaved"

"Our kingdom will fall, its very name forgotten."

"We cannot stop it."

"But…"

There was a moment of silence before the Oracle spoke again.

"We can avenge ourselves."

"The nine of you can."

"The nine of you will."

"The Empire of War…"

"Must be destroyed."

The prince looked up at the Oracle, his eyes full of darkness.

Eventually, he looked down.

"...My, oh my. How can nine people destroy an empire? It is protected by a god."

There were a few moments of silence, and then the little girl leaned forward.

Her childish voice resounded in the silence of the ancient temple,

echoing under its roof:

"Then you must kill the gods."

Chapter-2371: Nine Fates

As the echoes of the little girl's voice turned into silence, the nine of them fell into silence, as well. Her words had sounded like jesting… or at least they were supposed to. How could mortal men kill the gods?

And yet, a solemn atmosphere settled in the inner sanctum of the Oracle temple.

This peaceful realm of theirs was beautiful and thriving, but it did not enjoy the protection of a god. The gods had grown aloof and distant long ago… their temples stood proudly, and yet no matter how piously the priests and priestesses prayed, they were usually met with indifferent absence. Even War, the patron deity of humanity, had withdrawn from watching over the great, terrible empire of his.

The mortal realm where the nine of them had been born was not protected even by a neglectful deity, and so, it venerated no god. The ones they venerated instead were the Oracle — the women capable of glimpsing Fate.

The vast tapestry of fate was not something that mortals were meant to see, so the Oracle was blind, the terrible visage of what they had witnessed burned into their eyes, destroying them forever. That was their curse, but also their solace.

The Oracle was telling them that their realm was doomed, and that they would have to kill the gods.

Prince Eurys finally spoke, his voice shaking subtly:

"Mother… oh, Oracle. But… how can nine mortals kill the gods?"

The old hag seemed to study him with her blind eyes, then leaned back a little. Her creaky voice resounded in the inner sanctum:

"The War Empire is an insatiable beast that feeds on conquest. It is vast; it is prosperous. However, that prosperity is wicked, and worse than that, it is unsustainable. Their economy and their way of life can only be sustained by an influx of riches, or resources — and most importantly, of new slaves. Without the slaves, the Empire could not produce anything. But slaves… are not a renewable resource."

The woman spoke next, her words echoing somberly in the inner sanctum of the temple.

"You've read the imperial treaties, my son. You know the cruelty of their ways. The slaves they take do not last long, enduring endless labor. A few years, maybe… a decade, at most. And so, the Empire needs to conquer new lands, and procure new slaves. It won't ever stop, because it can't stop — if it does, it will starve."

The little girl spoke last, her voice turning small.

"Our kingdom is a peaceful one. It is a land of art, wine, wisdom, poetry, and culture. The Empire will come and take our art. It will take our wine. It will take our poets and philosophers and turn them into house slaves to educate the young masters. The rest — those who survive — will be sent to toil in the fields. In just a few generations, our culture will be no more. Our people will be us no more. Consumed and stolen by the conquering tyrants."

The woman wearing a deerskin around her shoulders finally spoke, her quiet voice sounding calm and even:

"That doesn't answer the question. All of us can't even stop an empire that one god watches over. How will the nine of us kill all six of them?"

The Oracle grew silent.

Eventually, the old hag spoke solemnly:

"You are a huntress, are you not? You should know how to kill a beast that is stronger than you."

The woman spoke next.

"The answer is simple. Not that it will be easy... far from it. It will be difficult. It will be unbearable. It will be impossible, even, for each of you."

The little girl finished what the woman started saying:

"But you must achieve the impossible, each of you. You must find the beast's weakness. You must lure it into a trap. You must sink your blade into the weak spot that you found."

The three of them spoke in unison then…

"The nine of you were chosen because you are special, just like this realm of ours was. Some of you are wise, and some of you are strong. Some of you are holy. However, fate has no use for those who are strong or those who are wise, and neither does it care for sages and saints. The only ones it cares for…"

Their voices enveloped the sanctum, sounding like a prophecy.

"Are those who are fated. And that is what you are, the nine of you. You are blessed by fate… you are cursed by fate. The strings of fate wrap around you tightly, and so, everything you do will echo across fate, shaking its very foundation."

The old hag opened her mouth to continue, but at that moment, the prince who was kneeling on the floor interrupted her:

"You say that our land will be ravaged by the empire, that our people will be slaughtered and enslaved. That we cannot save anyone, but must instead avenge everyone. That we must kill the gods!"

His voice trembled with barely suppressed anger.

"But must we really abandon our people? And what will happen to the world when the gods die? Aloof as they are, the gods serve as the pillars of existence. All of it rests on their shoulders. Must we… destroy it all?"

Instead of the Oracle, it was one of the nine who answered — a tall warrior with broad shoulders, his face as pale as ash, his eyes brimming with sorrow and darkness:

"If everyone we know and love will not exist anymore… then what is the worth of that existence? You are young and noble, my prince. You have no wife, no lover, no children. You will not have to watch them die or be taken by War. There is only one thought more terrible than knowing that our everything is doomed — the thought that those who bring us doom will remain unpunished. So, yes… if the Oracle speaks the truth, we shall destroy it all. We must. Why would we not?"

The young prince gritted his teeth.

"Because we will be destroying our own people, as well! Those who'll survive the slaughter and be taken by the empire!"

His words seemed to cool the inner sanctum. The faces of the nine people fell, and hints of doubt found their way into their eyes. They fell into a somber silence.

And in that silence, the courtesan wearing the clothes of a priestess spoke quietly, her voice resounding with the darkest kind of resolve:

"It is better to be dead than to be a slave. It is better to be killed than to be shackled. I will welcome death before I welcome chains… those I loved will mourn me, but they'll know. When I die, I'll be free."

Death was merciful, after all, but the life of a slave was cruel.

Slowly, the rest of them nodded their heads, and the prince lowered his.

The faces of the Oracles changed subtly.

Eventually, the old hag spoke:

"Each of you will have a task of their own. A great task… a terrible task. A task that must be accomplished at all costs. We are the Oracle, and we see fate. And so, we offer you as a sacrifice to fate. Go forth and drown the world in ichor as a retribution for the blood of our people that has not been spilled today, but will paint the sea red tomorrow."

The winds outside the temple howled as the woman turned to look at

the bewitching scholar.

"Sorceress Aletheia, the Philosopher. Your task is to seek truth. Go forth and reveal the lies of the gods! You will find their weakness, and teach the others how to bring upon doom."

The little girl looked at the slender man in elegant clothes.

"Aemedon the Sculptor, the Shaper of Stone. You will build the trap for the gods… you will herald the truth that Aletheia learns, and bring it to those who must listen. To shape their hearts into gravestones, and build the walls of the trap from that stone."

The woman leaned forward, her features twisting with sorrow.

"Prince Eurys… my son. Forgive me. Your task is the most bitter of all…"

The young prince was to become a slave.

The blind poet was to become lost in illusions…

The woman wearing a deerskin around her shoulders listened to what the Oracle ordered the others, her expression turning somber and pale. The task entrusted to the young boy, Auro, was especially harrowing.

She shuddered when the little girl spoke the terrible words.

Eventually, though, the Oracle grew silent and dismissed the others.

She was the only one left.

The woman raised her chin slightly.

"What of me, then? What is the task that I must accomplish?"

Despite her questions, the oracle remained silent.

After a while, the old hag let out a long sigh, so ancient and frail that it seemed like she would fall into pieces the next moment.

Her voice sounded hoarse, tired... and scared.

"You… oh, brave huntress. Your task is the gravest. Your task is the most important of them all, as well as the most fearsome."

The little girl continued:

"We the Oracle have witnessed fate. And using fate, we charted a course for the Nine. However… there is a being who knows fate far better than we do; who is far more adept at twisting its strings than we are. That being is your greatest enemy. And so, the task that you must accomplish is to strike that enemy down."

The third Oracle shivered, then leaned forward and said in a tone of ruthless resolve:

"Slay Weaver, the Demon of Fate. That is your fate, and what you must do."

Chapter-2372: Distant Gods

Sunny was startled awake — or rather, he regained his senses after receiving the truth. Just like the previous times, the boon he received was not quite a vision, but also not quite a memory. Rather, it was as if the knowledge of what had happened was placed directly into his mind, vague and disjointed, but somehow easy to understand.

The world of Ariel's Game was the same. The Shrine towered behind him, while the lake of lava was radiating insufferable heat in front of him. The sky was obscured by smoke and ash.

However, Sunny was different from how he had been before throwing the jade figure into the lake. There was a stunned, disbelieving expression on his face, and his heart was beating wildly.

His eyes were open, but he did not seem entirely aware of his surroundings just yet, overwhelmed by what he had learned.

"No way…"

Sunny jumped to his feet.

He was too rattled, his mind too full of chaotic thoughts, to calm down easily. He remained motionless for a while, then started pacing, kicking pieces of rubble with his feet.

"No, really. No way!"

Finally, Sunny stopped and looked at the distant mountains with wide eyes.

"What the hell did I just witness?"

The magnitude of the revelation he had received as a reward for killing the Wolf was too vast to fathom. Gods, daemons, the fate of

the world, Weaver…

And the Nine.

The mysterious group of people whose faint traces he discovered from time to time. Sunny always suspected that the Nine had been important — to the degree that his glorious appraisal in the First Nightmare could have very well been mostly due to the fact that he had managed to kill Hero… Auro of the Nine.

The young boy with vibrant red hair who had appeared in two of the truths Sunny had learned in Ariel's Game.

But to think that the Nine had been responsible for the death of the gods!

…Had been determined to kill the gods, at least.

There was no telling if they had succeeded.

But, somehow, Sunny was inclined to believe that they had.

When he tossed these two jade figures into the lava, the question he had asked was about the end of the world. Instead of a scene of total devastation on a battlefield between the gods and the daemons, though, he had been shown a seemingly mundane event of mortal men arriving on a beautiful island to inform a huntress who lived there that a Supreme Beast was rampaging on the border of their kingdom.

Sunny had assumed that he had been shown a moment of Slayer's past then… and he had.

But what if that moment was also the answer to his question?

What if that… was the moment the world's fate had been sealed?

Sunny grabbed his head and tried to calm himself.

'So… let's… let's think about it slowly.'

There was an empire founded by War God… by one of War God's

mortal vessels, most likely. At the dusk of the Golden Age, the gods grew aloof and distant, paying less and less attention to the mortal realms. And in their absence, the Empire of War embarked on an endless conquest.

It devoured countless realms, subjugated countless people, burned the temples of Shadow God… all for the glory of their neglectful deity.

Glory, glory, glory...

Sunny had experienced the torment of being an imperial slave himself, during his First Nightmare. He experienced the savagery of the War zealots as well, in his Second — granted, those had been driven mad by Hope, their most ardent desires set aflame by her poisonous influence.

The Empire continued to grow, conquering more and more land until it encountered a particular realm. It was a beautiful and peaceful realm… but it was also a very special one.

Because the people of that peaceful realm venerated no god, and were ruled by an Oracle instead.

In the revelation Sunny received, the Oracle mentioned that their kingdom was special in passing. But he knew that it had to be true — not only because of the three seers themselves, but also because there had been nine people living in that realm who all possessed the [Fated] Attribute… just like he possessed it once.

'That alone is crazy! It's completely insane!'

The Nine — all of them — had been Fated, just like Sunny was. Attributes were not unique to people, so there could be someone out there sharing this one with him, even if [Fated] felt like something exceedingly, if not inconceivably, rare.

Sunny would have accepted that one of the Nine had been Fated, but all of them? Nine people, living in the same kingdom, and at the same time on top of that?

That… that sounded like their existence itself had been fated. As if it

had been one of the knots holding up the great tapestry of fate together.

That small realm of theirs had indeed been special.

And when the hungry gaze of the Empire fell upon it… the Oracle sent nine fated champions to destroy the Empire. Not to save their homeland, which could not contend against War, but to avenge its destruction. To avenge their people, who were destined to be slaughtered and enslaved.

There was only one problem, though… the Empire had a guardian deity. One of the six great gods.

And so, the Nine were sworn to kill the gods.

'They… they couldn't have succeeded, could they?'

Only they could. The gods were dead, after all. The Empire had been destroyed. The sins it had committed brought upon a truly wrathful retribution — both on the Empire and on the rest of the world.

Sunny lowered his hands slowly.

'Can… can it really be the reason?'

Could the world have been destroyed by nine mere mortals and their dark resolve?

If it had been… then it would be quite poetic, if a little dreadful. It would make it so that the gods doomed themselves by neglecting the world they had created, and allowing those who claimed to wield their authority to rampage across the mortal realms.

The great gods would have been undone by little, insignificant mortals, whose suffering they had ignored.

But how could the Nine have killed the gods? That was what Sunny did not understand.

The clues were already in his hands, though…

Chapter-2373: Walls of the Trap

'The Nine, the Nine… what do I know about the Nine?'

Auro had been an imperial soldier as a young man. Eurys had been an imperial slave, but he also claimed to have slit a god's throat… now that Sunny knew more, he could guess that it had been the mortal vessel of War God, most likely. The one watching over the Empire.

'It had to be, right?'

Aletheia, meanwhile, ventured into the Tomb of Ariel.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Wait.'

What was it that the Oracle had said?

"You simply have to find the beast's weakness. You have to lure it into a trap. You have to sink your blade into its weak spot."

He remained silent for a while.

'Aletheia…'

The sorceress and philosopher, Aletheia, had been tasked with revealing the lies of the gods and teaching the truth to the rest of the Nine.

So, she had gone to the Tomb of Ariel and became the First Seeker. She was the only Seeker of Truth to have successfully entered the Estuary, and learned the secrets hidden there by Ariel, the Demon of Dread.

And among those secrets… was the truth of the Forgotten God and

his children.

Who were the Flaw of the gods.

'Wait…'

Aletheia had paid for learning the secrets of the Estuary by becoming the source of the Defilement. But that did not mean that she had failed to teach the truth of the Forgotten God to the rest of the Nine before succumbing to Corruption. She must have endured the knowledge of the Void and only passed that one secret along, considering that they seem to have succeeded in their plot at least partially.

But wasn't it strange?

The gods were indeed dead, but they had fallen in the war against the daemons… not against the Nine. The great war that had brought doom upon all of existence. So what had the Nine really achieved?

Sunny took a step back, biting his lips.

'Wait!'

The sculptor, Aemedon… what was the task the Oracle had given him?

"You will build the trap for the gods… you will herald the truth that Aletheia learns, and bring it to those who must listen. To shape their hearts into gravestones, and build the walls of the trap from that stone."

This, this was the answer!

Aletheia had learned the weakness of the beast, but it was Aemedon who had been tasked with building the trap.

It was a trap meant to bring about the death of the gods, though, so it would be strange to assume that the Oracle meant a literal contraption. Instead… it was a trap built from the hearts of living beings.

And who could it have been whose heart was supposed to become a gravestone for the gods?

"Bring it to those who must listen…"

To whom was Aemedon meant to deliver the truth Aletheia learned? Who had to listen?

Sunny's eyes glistened darkly.

Why, it was quite obvious, wasn't it? Considering what had happened next.

It was Nether, the Prince of the Underworld. The Demon of Destiny... the Demon of Choice.

He suddenly clenched his fists and shook them in the air.

"You damn Spell!"

The description of the Mantle of the Underworld clearly said this about Nether:

[...He wasn't the first to lead his army against the gods. However, he was the first to shed their blood, as well as learn the secrets of his own.]

But it was a blatant lie! Well… maybe it wasn't. But it was entirely misleading.

There were runes written by Nether on the walls of the Ebony Tower, which had been constructed after Hope was imprisoned by the gods. He had been wondering if the daemons were forbidden from siring offspring because they were of the Forgotten One, who slumbered in the Void.

That indicated that he had known about the connection between the seven daemons and the Forgotten God.

However, he must not have known the whole truth. Otherwise, he would not have been asking the question.

Weaver knew… probably because Weaver had ventured into the Void and beheld the Forgotten God in person. Ariel knew, as well, because he knew everyone's fears — including that of the gods. But he chose to bury that knowledge in the Tomb.

Where Aletheia found it.

And then…

Aemedon delivered that truth to the Underworld, and gave it to Nether.

And Nether made his choice.

'Hell.'

That… that was the inception of the Doom War.

Aemedon of the Nine had indeed built a trap for the gods. The walls of the trap were the hearts of the daemons, and he was the one who had shown them the way.

Sunny let out a laugh of disbelief.

"How do you kill a beast that is stronger than you?"

You could, for example, sick another dreadful beast upon it.

The Nine were not powerful enough to kill the gods, so they gave Nether the last push he needed to rally his siblings into rebelling against the heavens.

That was how the world had ended.

Or rather, that was how its end had begun.

…Of course, the Nine did more than just give the world the initial push to send it rolling into the abyss.

After all, Sunny had only considered the terrible and, quite honestly, unbelievable feats of two. There were seven of them left.

The blind poet… had probably gone to the Demon of Imagination.

The seasoned sea captain... the vision had not revealed his task, but Sunny could easily imagine him having something to do with the Demon of Repose and Night Garden.

Eurys had been a spy in the heart of the Empire, most likely, eventually ending up in the Demon Army. Auro… his task had apparently been the most harrowing of them all, even if Sunny had no idea what it was.

There was also the courtesan and the tall warrior. They were quite mysterious, and he was not sure what their role had been.

And Slayer, of course…

That one, he was not ready to contemplate yet.

But what had they done? What had their endgame been?

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Find a weakness. Build a trap. Sink your blade into the weak spot of the enemy.'

The weakness of the gods was the existence of the Forgotten God, and therefore the daemons. The trap itself was the Doom War.

But what was the blade of the Nine? How had they intended to deliver the fatal strike to the gods?

Had they simply supported the daemons in the Doom War, or had there been more to their machinations?

Sunny exhaled slowly.

Then, a different set of runes surfaced in his memory…

His eyes trembled.

Chapter-2374: Demons of Doom

They were the runes left on the floor of the underground cell under the ruined cathedral of the Dark City by one of the two High Priests of the Nigthmare Spell, from whose corpse Sunny had retrieved Weaver's Mask.

He had not been able to read them at first, but managed to discern their meaning during his return to the Forgotten Shore as a Saint.

Taking a step back, Sunny whispered:

"Thus spoke Weaver… they will open the Gates. And they did, calling forth doom and destruction upon us. Now, in the ruins, gods lay dead. And the daemons have fallen. The Forgotten One comes, wide awake, to consume them."

He closed his eyes for a moment.

The weapon to kill the gods… was it the Forgotten God himself? Had the Nine wanted to unseal the Void, thus awakening him and causing the end of all existence?

Was that their vengeance for the blood of their people that the Empire had spilled, for the land it destroyed, and the freedom it robbed?

Were these bastards fated, or were they a personification of doom?

"Those… those lunatics."

He shuddered, then shook his head.

'No… no, I am jumping to conclusions.'

Weaver had proclaimed that "they" would open the Gates. The they in question could have been the Nine… it could have been the daemons.

Or the gods. It could have even been Weaver themselves — the Demon of Fate could have been simply proclaiming their own intention.

Sunny raised his hands and rubbed his face furiously.

He had learned so much… but he still did not have any answers!

How had that damned war ended?!

Had the Nine achieved their goal, or had they ultimately failed?

Were the Gates of the Void open, or were they still closed?

The spreading Corruption, the blossoming Nightmare Seeds, and the constant expansion of the Dream Realm suggested that they were wide open, and that the Forgotten God was free. And yet, the Forgotten God also seemed imprisoned and asleep, because if he was not, there would be no existence left. All of it would be swallowed by the Void.

Everything was a paradox, and Sunny did not have the key to solve it.

'Ah, I don't get it…'

He groaned.

One thing was certain, though.

There had always been a third player hiding behind the curtain. The daemons, the gods… and the Nine.

The fate of the world had been decided by these three forces.

And while the Nine seemed pitifully weak in comparison to these mythical figures, their influence was anything but. In fact, because of how little was known about them, the Nine seemed especially dangerous.

No… actually, there was a fourth force as well. The most important of them all. How could Sunny have forgotten?

There was Weaver.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

He still did not know how Weaver fit into all of this, what goal Weaver had pursued, and what had happened to them.

The Oracle had seemed to believe that the Demon of Fate would be the greatest obstacle in the path of the Nine. Considering that the Nine had intended to kill the gods and destroy the world… did that mean that Weaver's goal had been the opposite?

No, it did not. Knowing that slippery daemon… not that Sunny knew them that well… it could have been anything. Weaver might have been the enemy of the Nine, or they might have been using the Nine to further their own goals.

Who could know the truth?

Well… Slayer could, if she had her memories.

After all, her task was to kill Weaver.

'Insanity!'

"To hell with this..."

Turning around, Sunny headed for the Shrine of Truth with determined steps. Entering the cool darkness of its great hall, he ignored Kai and walked directly to Slayer, who was sharpening her swords while leaning her back against one of the altars.

Stopping in front of her, he looked down and growled:

"So… tell me. Did you manage to kill Weaver?"

The sinister Shadow stared at him silently, showing no trace of emotion.

He scoffed.

"Or did you fail? Right. You must have."

Of course, she had. How could someone so insignificant slay the Demon of Fate? The very thought was preposterous.

But then again…

The thought that nine mortals could bring about the death of the gods was preposterous, as well. And yet, the gods were dead.

Was… was the woman whose Shadow now served him truly Weaver's killer?

No, it was impossible.

"You must have died by Weaver's hand, instead!"

Slayer showed no reaction at all, as if his words held no meaning.

However…

He felt her cold, black eyes changing slightly.

Finally, there was a hint of emotion.

What was it?

Pride… despair? Resolve? Confusion?

It seemed that Slayer did not know herself.

Well, why would she?

She did not even remember her name, let alone her past.

Sunny covered his face with a palm and sighed deeply.

"What... what the hell did you do, you lunatics?"

Slayer stared at him for a few more moments, then shrugged and returned to sharpening her swords, completely indifferent to the turmoil in his heart.

Sunny cursed quietly.

"I… have some strong words to say to Eurys, the next time I meet him."

Kai, who had walked over and was looking at them in confusion, raised a brow.

"Eurys? Who is that?"

Sunny glanced at him, blinked a few times, and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture.

"Eurys… he's just an acquaintance of mine. A god-slaying slave, but also a prince, who was banished from death by a divine curse. He just sort of hangs out in the Shadow Realm now, so I visit him from time to time to chat, joke around, and try to kill him. Oh… he's also a skeleton. A talking skeleton. Well, about eighty percent of a talking skeleton — he had lost a few bones over time."

Kai nodded slowly.

"Ah, I see. Makes... sense, I guess. Are you alright, though? You seem… on edge."

Sunny looked at him darkly.

"Of course I am alright."

He smiled and pointed at himself with a thumb.

"I am perfectly alright being on edge."

Kai coughed.

"Oh. That's… good, then."

Next morning, three new Snow figures arrived to surround the destroyed volcano.

Chapter-2375: Hear no Evil

The abominations of the Snow Domain surrounded the Shrine of Truth in the morning. This time, it was a Cursed Demon and two Cursed Monsters — the force that had been defending the Shrine of Fear at the start of the game.

By then, the lake of lava was already starting to cool. It slowly lost its incandescence and dimmed, solidifying into a vast plain of ash-grey rock. However, Sunny knew that the solid nature of this crust was merely an illusion — it was like a thin layer resting atop a scorching abyss of magma, too easily broken by the forces that a battle between deific figures would unleash.

Actually, he was considering using the treacherous nature of the thin crust as a strategy. Cursed Nightmare Creatures would not be seriously harmed by something as trifling as taking a plunge into a pool of lava, and they were not going to drown in it, either. However, he could still gain an advantage by pulling them into the depths of the volcano…

Just not too deep, since he was wary of descending lower than the sea of clouds.

Cursed Nightmare Creatures were not as bound by the mundane logic as lesser beings were, but some things were still dictated by their nature. For example, creatures that were meant to walk the earth would grow weaker if forced to fight in the water. Sunny himself, however, did not have that problem — he could change his form freely, and so, any battlefield was his home.

The form of the Onyx Serpent was one he was attuned to the most, as well. Or rather... would it be the Jade Serpent now? In any case, he had battled Daeron the Serpent King while using this Shell, and many abominations since. So, if he managed to pull the new Snow Demon into the lava…

There, in the depths, he might actually defeat it.

But Sunny did not feel confident.

In fact, he was overcome by a feeling of unease. He felt like a rat that had been pushed into a corner.

The battle against the Wolf had already been perilous enough. It had been a close call. Now, however…

Sunny's wounds, both physical and unseen, were quite severe. They had healed somewhat, but not enough to allow him to enter the battle at his full strength come tomorrow. So facing a Cursed Demon, even in the depths of the volcano, did not seem like a winning bet.

Far from it.

If Sunny was honest with himself, he had to admit that he would not be of much use as a warrior in the upcoming battle.

Luckily, there was a different strategy he could use… had to use, considering that there were no better options.

Instead of participating in the battle himself, he could turn into a shadow and augment someone.

Kai and Slayer both received two boons of ash. They were already far more powerful than Transcendent beings were supposed to be, and while Sunny could not augment Kai — his friend was neither part of him nor a subject of his Domain — he could augment Slayer.

That was not an optimal use of his power, though.

The optimal use of it would be to augment one of his most powerful shades. The shade of the Wolf, for example.

The shadows dwelling in his soul were not alive and did not possess the sense of self. As a result, they could not really wield the Will, which was of paramount importance in a battle between deities. So even the Sacred shades were not too different from immensely powerful, but ultimately mundane beasts.

That was unless Sunny wrapped himself around them.

If he did, not only would their power be amplified, but he would also be able to substitute their absent Will with his own. That way, a Sacred shade would become much closer to the glory of its former self.

If Sunny augmented the shadow of the Wolf, the two of them together would stand a decently good chance of slaying a Cursed Demon.

That was something to consider, at least. That was the best strategy he could come up with in the absence of Sacred soul shards to cast some powerful spell, or any other material and resource to pull off a daring trick.

'It… should be good enough, right?'

If Sunny and the Wolf faced the Cursed Demon… Slayer, Kai, the shadow of Abundance, the pack of Shadow Wolves, and the remaining Obsidian Wasps would have to deal with the two Cursed Monsters.

Could they?

Alternatively, he could take a risk and concentrate all his forces on one of the enemies first, gambling on the chance of slaying it swiftly.

There was a lot to consider...

But he could only consider it after learning more about his enemies.

At that moment, Sunny and his companions were standing on the roof of the Shrine of Truth, observing the surrounding peaks tensely. The sun was rising above the miniature realm of Ariel's Game, and the glass bridges were collapsing into plumes of snow.

Sunny sighed and looked at Kai.

"Are you sure?"

Kai nodded.

"Quite sure, yes. It should be a Demon."

Kai could see further and better than Sunny, but he could not see the souls of living beings like Sunny. That said, Awakened possessed senses beyond that of mundane people, and these senses developed the more experienced they became, and the higher their Rank was. Saints would rarely be mistaken about the Class and Rank of an enemy even without gazing into the enemy's soul.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then asked somberly:

"So what kind of abominable horror is it?"

Kai raised a hand to shield his eyes from the rays of the rising sun and looked east, at the distant snow-covered peak.

His expression changed subtly.

"I see it. It…"

His voice changed, too.

"...it is looking back."

Then, Kai fell silent, his body trembling slightly.

Sunny frowned.

"What does it look like, though?"

Kai's lips moved as if he was going to say something… before he did, however, Sunny was distracted by a sudden movement.

He looked to the side in confusion, where Slayer seemed to be unsheathing her swords.

'Strange.'

Kai finally spoke, the words leaving his mouth sounding like a jumbled mess of eerie, alien curses.

Sunny belatedly realized that listening to these words was a terrible mistake… but by then, they had already crawled into his ears, and

slithered their way into his mind.

'Not good...'

Then, everything turned dark.

Chapter-2376: Missing Time

'I'm hurt…'

The first thing Sunny felt was pain. He was supposed to be in pain, considering that both his body and soul had been ravaged by the Wolf. But the mild suffering he had been enduring without even paying attention to was gone, replaced by a new and unfamiliar agony.

His entire body was in pain.

The pain was not concentrated in one spot, but instead emanated from a dozen different sources, fusing into one odious sensation. Therefore, Sunny had to conclude that he was seriously hurt.

'...Since it hurts, I'm still alive.'

That was good news, at least.

He opened his eyes slowly. The black sky hung above him at an angle, terribly close. It was also made of scorched stone, with deep cracks running through its broken surface. Additionally, it was moving.

No… it was not the sky. He was staring at the ceiling of the Shrine of Truth. Or was it a wall? In any case, neither the ceiling nor the wall of the Shrine were moving. Instead, it was Sunny himself.

He was being dragged across an uneven stone surface, its ridges biting into his back.

'What... the hell?'

The last thing he remembered was asking Kai to describe the Snow Demon. How did he end up back in the Shrine?

More importantly, why was he being dragged, and who was dragging him?

Craning his neck, Sunny looked up.

Someone was holding his wrist in a vice-like grip, using it to drag his body across the stone like a sack of synthpaste. That someone was shrouded in a veil of ghostly smoke, which made discerning their shape and form difficult.

Sunny recognized them instantly, of course. It was Slayer… however, Slayer looked much worse than she had before. Her light armor was torn and scorched, dark smoke was seeping from countless ghastly wounds on her ebony body, and one of her arms was hanging limp, seemingly broken.

'What happened to Slayer?'

No, more importantly…

What happened to him?!

Sunny finally regained his senses and evaluated the situation.

What he sensed sent him into utter shock.

First of all… the ceiling above him was indeed the wall of the Shrine of Truth. And it was indeed looming above him at an angle — that was because the entire Shrine was tilted, half of its vast interior drowned by lava. Slayer was currently dragging Sunny up the slope of one of the pillars, away from the incandescent lava.

Secondly, there were several arrows sticking out of his body. The body itself was in even worse shape than Slayer's, riddled with torn wounds and lacerations — new ones on top of the old ones.

And most shocking of all, his entire right arm was missing.

'...Where did my arm go?'

Where was his arm?!

Sunny was so shocked that he remained motionless, allowing Slayer to drag him to where the pillar met the ceiling. Letting go of his wrist, she straightened and observed the interior of the Shrine darkly.

Everything was too strange. Sunny simply could not understand what had happened, and what the situation was.

He let out a pained groan and sat up, then evaluated his condition somberly.

His wounds were quite severe, and his arm was indeed missing. Luckily, Blood Weave had prevented him from bleeding out, so his life was not at risk. His essence was nearly depleted, though, and his soul seemed to have sustained dire damage, as well.

His head ached terribly.

Sunny had no words to describe his feelings.

'Something really bizarre must have happened.'

Manifesting a bit of shadows to create a replacement for his missing arm and hand, he grimaced and pulled one of the arrows out from between his ribs. He stared at it, then looked up at Slayer.

"Mind telling me why one of your arrows was sticking out of me?"

Of course, he would not have failed to recognize an arrow of his own exquisite making.

She regarded him silently for a while, then raised a hand and extended four fingers.

Sunny frowned.

"Four? What is that supposed to mean?"

Then, he looked down and sighed.

"Oh. You meant that there were four of your arrows sticking out of me, not one… duly noted."

Grimacing from pain, he pulled the rest of the arrows out, hesitated a little, and handed them back to Slayer. Instantly, his body felt a hundred times lighter.

'That… that knave! She used my own enchantments against me!'

Indeed, the four arrows in question were meant to immobilize the enemy, or at least slow them down. So, Sunny could at least surmise that his Shadow had not tried to kill him. She had merely tried to debilitate him.

He glanced at his missing arm. The stump was not bleeding, and the wound was messy. Not at all a clean cut… so, something else must have torn his limb off.

That was a relief.

'How is this a relief? One of my limbs is missing!'

Sunny groaned.

Still, he would have been quite cross if it turned out that Slayer had cut off his arm. It was better to think that something else had ripped it off.

There was a hole in the wall of the Shrine where there had been none before, and through it, he could see the dark sky.

It was night.

...It had been morning just a few moments ago.

Sunny concentrated on his shadow sense, then turned his head and looked at the nearby pillar. Kai was hanging from it, impaled by two black arrows, his mouth covered by a makeshift gag.

He was alive, but unconscious.

Sunny studied his friend for a bit, making sure that he was alright, then turned to Slayer once more.

When he finally spoke, his voice sounded a little strained:

"So… do you want to tell me what happened to the day that is missing from my memory?"

Slayer stared at him coldly for a while, then raised a hand and extended two fingers.

Sunny sighed.

"What do you… wait. Two days that are missing from my memory?"

She nodded silently and sat down, tiredly leaning her back against the wall.

Sunny paled.

'Two days…'

If two days had passed...

Then the Snow Demon and the two Snow Monsters had already launched their attack.

The battle... was over?

Chapter-2377: Oblivious Victors

Two days had passed, and it was night again. Which meant that the three figures of the Snow Domain had besieged the Shrine of Truth… and failed.

Someone had stopped them.

But who?

Sunny studied his own pathetic state, then glanced at Slayer. Finally, he looked at Kai.

A few moments later, he muttered a stifled curse.

His thoughts were in disarray.

"What… the hell?"

He had been saying that a lot after entering Ariel's Game. So, he had to be careful not to say it again… unless he wanted to get stuck with another catchphrase.

And he had plenty of those already.

In any case, it seemed like Sunny and Kai had fallen victim to some kind of mind attack while observing the Snow Demon, and then… and then...

Something happened, but the Snow Demon failed to conquer the Shrine and kill them.

From what Sunny had seen so far, that something seemed to have been Slayer.

That did not make much sense, considering that Slayer was not nearly powerful enough to defeat a Cursed Demon, let alone one

accompanied by two Cursed Monsters. And yet, the evidence was hard to deny.

The evidence being that they were still alive.

Sunny sighed deeply.

Slayer was not going to talk, so he had no choice but to try to deduce what had happened slowly.

But first…

'I should probably take Kai off that wall.'

His friend did not look very comfortable, pinned to a pillar by arrows and gagged.

Granted, Slayer must have gagged him for a reason…

'...I'll take it slow.'

***

Some time later, Sunny and Kai climbed out of the tilting Shrine and observed the scene of utter devastation outside. Both looked rattled and confused, not to mention battered, and seeing the lake of lava did not make them feel any better.

Slayer had stayed inside, seemingly too tired and wounded to move.

"What the…"

Sunny stopped himself from finishing the sentence, raised his hands, and rubbed his face furiously.

One of his hands was made of flesh, sinew, and bone. The other was entirely black, manifested from shadows.

The platform on which the Shrine of Truth stood had split in two. One half of it was entirely gone, the other was partially submerged in lava — the ancient temple itself was tilted on the side, half-drowned in the lake.

The layer of cooled lava that had formed a crust atop the lake was almost entirely gone, shattered and swallowed by the scorching crucible. Still, some of it remained… grotesque silhouettes formed from volcanic rock protruded from the incandescent depths, reaching toward the sky with eerily shaped fingers.

They looked like unfinished creations of a mad sculptor, and simply looking at them made Sunny's skin crawl.

It was as if a swarm of indescribable… beings… had tried to form themselves from fiery lava, but were frozen solid midway, failing to take shape. Now, only their empty husks remained, soulless and twisted in agony, like a legion of sinful souls who had failed to escape hell.

Or maybe someone had just wanted to create a garden of creepy statues. Either version could be true.

Kai opened his mouth and whispered:

"What the hell?"

Sunny looked at him with gratitude.

"...My thoughts exactly."

His friend was in rough shape, but far better off than Sunny and Slayer were. Apart from the wounds caused by the arrows, he was relatively unscathed — and those weren't a threat to a Transcendent being.

He had no memory of what had happened in the past two days, either. The last thing he remembered was catching a glimpse of the Snow Demon… and yet, he did not remember what the creature looked like, or what it was.

Sunny felt deeply… unnerved.

He would have been frightened, really, if not for the fact that they had found three jade figurines laying in the ash near the altar, just a few meters away from the lava.

The Snow Demon… whatever that thing had been… was dead.

The Monsters were dead, too.

Sunny, Kai, and Slayer were alive.

Somehow.

That should have been good news, but Sunny only felt more disturbed, not knowing how their enemies had died. Humans feared the unknown the most, after all.

He looked down with a grimace.

"Well, let us see what we do know."

Even if his memory of the past two days was gone, he could deduce some things from the clues left behind by the missing time.

As the two of them flew to the edges of the volcano, the night sky rippling with shimmering starlight above them, Sunny went over all these clues.

First of all, Sunny and Kai were missing their memories. They had been affected by some kind of mental attack, while Slayer had seemingly resisted it — or had been incapable of being targeted by that attack, to begin with, due to her inherent difference from them.

It was easy to deduce that Sunny and Kai had not remained passive and motionless while under foreign influence, too. In fact, they seemed to have involved themselves in all kinds of activity — their wounds were solid proof of that.

Additionally, their behavior in the past two days had to have been different from what they would usually do. In other words, they had not been acting as themselves — otherwise, Slayer would have no reason to debilitate them with arrows or gag Kai.

Sunny could not be sure, but after studying Kai's wounds — as well as his own — he suspected that the two of them had not only fought Slayer, but also other powerful beings… as well as each other.

That was quite a disturbing theory, and although Sunny could not thoroughly prove it, he could not confidently refute it either.

'This is the worst.'

If they had indeed suffered a mental attack, this would be the worst crisis of that nature he had encountered in a long while... maybe even ever. After all, he had retained at least some senses even at LO49 or on the Ashen Barrow… but now, he could not even remember what he had done.

That should not have been possible. His mental resistances were extremely formidable, and even if his other incarnations were not here, he still possessed the Will of a Supreme Titan. No mental attack should have been able to enthrall him so thoroughly.

It was the fact that something that should have been impossible had happened that was driving Sunny mad.

Just what kind of creature had that Cursed Demon been?

The worst part of all…

Was knowing that now with the creature gone, there was a high possibility that Sunny would never find out.

It could all remain a mystery... forever.

Looking around, he wondered if that was a mercy, instead.

Chapter-2378: Eerie Clues

The only witness — Slayer — was not talking, but Sunny had some other clues, as well.

His own state, for example.

Quite a lot of his essence was gone. Not only that, but he could not summon any of his shades, which meant that they all had been destroyed in the battle and were currently repairing themselves.

The Shadow Wolf and its pack, the Obsidian Wasps, and Abundance.

'Had I actually implemented the shade augmentation strategy?'

It was possible.

But had he implemented it against the enemy… or against one of his companions?

There was no answer to that, although Sunny doubted that either Slayer or Kai could have survived his assault.

The three Snow figures were dead, and he was missing an arm. So… unless it was Kai who had bitten it off in his dragon form, Sunny was inclined to believe that he had clashed with the Cursed Demon and the two Monsters, instead.

He looked at Kai strangely. Kai noticed it and forced out a smile.

"What?"

Sunny lingered for a while, then shook his head.

"Nothing. Just wondering how sharp your teeth are..."

Kai touched his lips, then blinked a couple of times and looked away.

The problem was that the shades of the three Snow abominations were not in Sunny's soul. Which meant that, although they were dead, he had not killed them — and neither had Slayer.

So how the hell had they died?!

Sunny folded the wings he had manifested and landed on a rock outcropping at the edges of the lake of lava — too close to the misty shore of the sea of clouds to feel comfortable. Kai landed nearby, and the two of them stared at the enormous corpse in front of them.

Or rather, a half of it.

The Cursed Monster was unmistakably dead. It was an indescribable monstrosity that was vaguely humanoid in shape, with countless eyes littering the malformed dome of its hideous head. It had a gaunt, pale torso and too many arms, each ending in a set of terrifying claws… as for the lower part of his body, there was no saying how it looked. It was missing.

Sunny could swear that the appalling face of the fallen deity had frozen in a grimace of horror.

He glanced at Kai and shivered.

"Any idea how it died?"

Kai remained silent for a moment, then said stiffly:

"Well, I am pretty sure that it died from being torn in half."

That was pretty indisputable logic.

…Well, actually, it wasn't. A Cursed Monster would not have been killed by something as mundane as being torn in half. Neither would it have been terrified in its last moments.

Feeling a cold shiver run down his spine, Sunny forced out a pale smile.

"Are there soul shards inside?"

Kai nodded slowly.

"I see one. But, if you don't mind… I'd prefer it if we don't try to dig it out just yet."

Sunny scoffed, then grimaced and pressed a hand against his wounds.

"Yeah. Let's not... just yet."

There was another corpse they had to take a look at, almost exactly on the other side of the shattered volcano.

Flying there took them a little bit of time, and when they reached the massive remains, Sunny just stared at them with a strange expression.

The second corpse… had turned out to not be the second corpse. Instead, it was the lower half of the Cursed Monster they had already investigated.

There was no explanation as to how it ended up all the way on the opposite side of the lake of lava, and no additional clues as to how the creature had died.

Neither was there any trace left of the second Cursed Monster. It had simply vanished, as if it had never existed at all… just like the Snow Demon had.

Perhaps their bodies had drowned in the lava, perhaps they had fallen into the sea of clouds.

Perhaps they had simply ceased to exist for some unknown reason.

Anything could have happened, really.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

"Let's… let's explore more. We might find something else."

And so they did.

In truth, he did not really hope to find more clues. He simply wanted to get away from the mangled remains of the Cursed Monster and do

something to occupy his rattled mind.

Sunny and Kai spent some time exploring the lake of lava. They studied the eerie, half-formed sculptures of volcanic rock protruding from it here and there. Being close to them gave both an eerie and unpleasant feeling, so they proceded to investigate the shores of the lake instead.

Eventually, they did find something.

"Well, what would you know?"

Sunny landed on a small island of cooled lava and looked down incredulously.

He seemed... to have found his missing arm.

It was still encased in the black carapace of the Jade Mantle, laying in the middle of a vast web of cracks that stretched from one edge of the small isle to another. The hand was missing a couple of fingers, but those that remained were still clenched into a fist.

His severed hand was holding onto something.

Sunny crouched near it and tried to pick up an impossibly thin piece of torn string that protruded from the mangled fist. He failed at first, and only succeeded after putting some Will into his touch.

The string was infinitely fine, but also unbelievably durable, almost impossible to tear or cut. It resembled a single thread of black silk, or maybe a single string of a terrifying spider web. All he knew was that at some point in the past two days, he had lost an arm while trying to cut that thread.

Looking at Kai, Sunny remained silent for a while, and then asked in a subdued tone:

"So… what do you think happened to us?"

Kai's expression was deeply disturbed.

He shook his head slightly, then said quietly:

"I don't know."

Sunny let out a long sigh.

"Well, I have a couple of ideas."

But really, he was in complete darkness, just as full of doubt as Kai.

That Cursed Demon… it must have been some kind of Mind Demon, if such things existed at all. Whatever Kai beheld on the snowy mountain might have been simply its vessel, while the Demon itself might have been a being of neither flesh nor spirit.

It might have been like an idea, instead.

At least that was what Sunny imagined after witnessing all these unexplainable things.

In any case, Sunny and Kai had fallen under the influence of the Demon… had maybe become its new vessels, even. They would have been simply debilitated at first, then fully taken once the morning of the attack came. Slayer must have restrained them before that, but that was as much as she could do.

How had she defeated the Demon and the two Monsters, then?

Sunny did not know.

He vaguely suspected that the strings Kai had seen were how the Snow Tyrant controlled the rest of its figures. So, by severing one of those strings, Sunny must have liberated one of the abominations — the Cursed Demon itself, perhaps — from under the Tyrant's control.

Which meant that he had been resisting whatever had happened to him at least to some degree. Maybe?

He must have.

And then…

There was no knowing what had happened then.

Perhaps the Demon itself had killed the Monsters.

Perhaps Slayer had somehow incited and evaded it until the sun rose above the horizon.

If the Demon had failed to eliminate the Ash figures and stayed on a black square after the end of its move…

Who knew what could have become of it?

Nobody did. It was a complete mystery... and a frightening one, at that.

Sunny was in pain, tired, and deeply disturbed. He did not even want to admit how disturbed he was — it was to the point that missing an arm seemed a minor thing in comparison.

Picking up his arm from the stone, he turned and looked at Kai with a somewhat lost expression.

"You know… I have never lost a limb before. This is a first."

Kai smiled weakly.

"Really? I would have thought…"

Sunny shook his head.

He wanted to add something like "well, unless you count the head as a limb", but remained silent instead.

He was not in the mood for that.

Eventually, he said in a somber tone:

"Really. I guess… we've won, though? Should we be happy?"

Kai did not answer.

Sunny did not speak for a while, either.

Somehow, this particular victory — if it could even be called that — made him feel more troubled than any defeat.

Chapter-2379: No Way Back

Sunny had never found any answers.

The mystery of the Snow Demon remained unsolved, and he suspected that he might never find out what that creature had been and what it had done to him and his companions.

Maybe they would meet again, one day, in the dark reaches of the Shadow Realm. But since Sunny did not even know what the eerie Demon had looked like — or if it had even looked like anything at all — they would not recognize each other.

So, he could only console himself by the fact that the mysterious abomination was dead.

Disheartened, Sunny and Kai returned to the Shrine of Truth. Slayer was still leaning against the wall atop the sloping pillar, seemingly asleep… Sunny had never seen a Shadow sleep before, so she must have been truly exhausted by what transpired during the two missing days.

He could summon her back into the nurturing darkness of his soul, but that would mean not being able to summon her again until her wounds were entirely healed. And that was a luxury he could not afford at the moment.

After all, three more Snow figures were going to surround the Shrine of Truth come morning — most likely. Now, there were only five of them left on the board: two Beasts, two Devils, and the Tyrant itself. So, at least one of the three figures was likely to be a Devil.

Sunny closed his eyes, suddenly aware of just how beaten and battered his body was.

He was missing an arm, damn it…

Well, actually, he wasn't missing it anymore. He had found his arm, it was just not attached to his body.

'...That's a bit funny.'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dismissed the Jade Mantle and the surrogate arm he had manifested from the shadows. Then, he pressed the severed arm to the mangled stump and cursed quietly, concentrating on controlling the flow of his blood.

Kai observed him with a strange expression.

"What are you doing?"

Sunny glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"Trying to regrow an arm."

In truth, even some Saints could regrow missing parts of their bodies — it just took a lot of time. Supremes were even more tenacious, but Sunny naturally did not have a lot of insight into how long it would take a Sovereign to regrow a limb... there was simply no data on that issue.

He healed a lot faster than most due to the Blood Weave, but still, reattaching a severed arm was going to waste much less time than cultivating an entirely new one.

Plus… he was attached to his arms. They had gone through a lot with him.

"I need both hands for cooking, you know? As well as for... other things..."

His attempt to lighten the mood fell flat.

After that, neither Sunny nor Kai spoke for a while.

Both felt disheartened. They might have survived the battle, but it was not due to their skill or effort. It was not even due to luck… there was simply no explanation for why they were still alive, which meant that they were only alive by accident.

Eventually, Kai sighed.

"I don't know why I am surprised."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Kai hesitated for a while, then smiled faintly.

"I guess it is because of you and Nephis. The two of you have a habit of making the impossible seem normal. You are powerful beyond reason, and the way both of you think is beyond reason too. So, sometimes, it is easy to forget that the things you do are not reasonable. They are not normal at all."

He shook his head.

"It is not normal to defeat a god. In fact, it is entirely unreasonable to even try fighting a god — especially an ancient, malevolent, corrupted one. And yet, that is what we have been doing ever since entering the strange realm, isn't it? Not only that, but we've even managed to kill several of those fallen deities. You seemed to take it in stride, so at some point, I found myself assuming that that was how things were supposed to be. But, Sunny…"

Kai fell silent for a few moments, then looked at him with a slight frown.

"They're not. No matter how powerful we are, these beings are still Cursed Ones. They are former gods… they are literal beings of legends. The harrowing and chilling kind of legends. So, I shouldn't have been surprised when something like that happened. Actually, it is a miracle that something like that had not happened sooner."

Sunny scowled, not entirely sure how to respond.

"Are you trying to say that I am reckless?"

Kai shook his head.

"No… not really. Being reckless means that you have a choice

between safety and danger, and we weren't really given a choice, were we? It is not like the Cursed Ones would not have come for us if we stayed still, here in this cursed place."

He sighed.

"What I am trying to say is that, maybe, meeting that Snow Demon was a stroke of luck. It gave us a reminder that beings like that are beyond our league… so much so that we cannot even understand them, let alone match them. Well, some of them, at least. Every enemy we face can be our last. And what would you know? We managed to receive that reminder without dying. That's a good thing."

Sunny studied him for a while, then nodded slowly.

Kai was right. Sunny had done well facing Great Nightmare Creatures, so he assumed that fighting against Cursed Ones would not feel much different now that he was a Supreme. But really, every single one of them was an opponent he could not afford to underestimate.

In fact, he had been lucky not to encounter any truly dangerous Great abominations, probably because most of the ones he had slain came from the jungles of Godgrave. In the Dream Realm, they were on the younger side, and not as sinister as those great horrors that had been wandering its dreadful reaches since the times of the Doom War.

And Cursed Nightmare Creatures were on an entirely different scale, as far as malevolence was concerned.

Kai sighed.

"I also realized… that you were right."

Sunny looked at him with a silent question.

Kai remained silent for a moment, then spoke in a sober tone:

"Before all this started, you told me that a couple of Supremes would not be able to protect humanity, and that becoming Sacred was the only way for you and Nephis. You seem so immensely powerful to

me, so out of reach... so, I did not take it seriously enough. But now I see that you were right. The Cursed Ones are already this terrifying, and I don't even want to imagine what Unholy Nightmare Creatures are capable of. I am not sure that I can. So, there is indeed only one way — forward. Whether we like it or not."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, his expression unreadable.

'A reminder, huh?'

Then, he grimaced and cursed loudly.

Kai flinched.

"Oh… I'm sorry. Was I too presumptuous?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and shook his head.

"No, it's just… I think my nerves are reconnecting…"

He could suddenly feel his missing arm again…

And while being reunited with it felt wonderful, it also hurt like hell.

Chapter-2380: Shifting Scales

By morning, Sunny's bones had reconnected, and his arm was not at risk of falling off anymore. That said, he could not really move it yet, so it just hung limply at his side.

There was also the problem of the missing fingers. Unlike the arm itself, he had never found them — so, the fingers would have to grow on their own, which was not going to be a short or pleasant process.

Of course, if Sunny managed to get out of Ariel's Game early, Nephis would heal him in no time…

The problem was that he had a far greater chance of never leaving this strange place at all.

As the sun showed itself from beyond the horizon, three new Snow figures did, indeed, move to occupy the surrounding peaks. Both Sunny and Kai felt uneasy about scouting their enemies, considering what had happened the last time they tried, but they had little choice — going into battle blindly was a far worse prospect.

So, Sunny mustered his courage and asked Kai to take a look.

This time, his friend remained silent for far longer than usual.

When he eventually turned to Sunny, there was a very strange expression on his face.

Sunny frowned, not liking it one bit.

"What?"

Kai hesitated for a few moments.

"Listen, Sunny… before I say anything… I feel that I need to mention that I have nothing…"

Sunny pursed his lips.

"Stop stalling. Out with it!"

Kai cleared his throat, then pointed at the northern peak.

"Well. There is no other way to say it. But there's… there's a dragon on that mountain."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, staring at his friend in disbelief. After a few moments, he asked evenly:

"A dragon?"

Kai nodded.

"Yeah… it's a white dragon. It's very beautiful, actually."

Sunny stared at him some more.

"Are you kidding me?"

Kai chuckled nervously.

"No. Why would I joke about something like this?"

Sunny raised a trembling hand and pulled on his hair.

"No, really? What the hell is this… how come… listen here, you!"

He pointed an accusing finger at Kai.

"Let me tell you, I've been around the Dream Realm and back! And never — not once! — have I met a dragon without you around. What are you, a dragon magnet? How the hell are you attracting all these dragons, bastard?!"

Kai coughed a couple of times.

"Calm down, please. Well… true, people call me the Dragonslayer, and I have an Attribute of that name. But if you think about it, technically, I only ever encountered one dragon. The other one was myself, so that doesn't really count. So… you can't blame me for this

dragon, alright? I have no control over where dragons decide to show up, or why…"

Sunny stared at him with suspicion.

It couldn't be a coincidence, could it? Every time there was a dragon, Kai was somewhere nearby. Granted, the same could be said about most members of the cohort, since they were usually in the same place.

Still!

'Damn Dragonslayer…'

Sunny let out a long sigh, then winced and decided to let it go.

"...What about the other two peaks?"

Kai pointed to the eastern peak.

"That peak… seems to be infested with rats. I can't count how many of them are there, because there are too many. The whole mountain is teeming with them, and they seem to be… eating the mountain."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How in the world… actually, never mind. And the last one?"

Kai hesitated, but chose not to point to the southern peak. In fact, he did not even look at it again.

"There is someone we've already seen on the mountain to the south. It's the Devil from the tree… the one who looks like a human, or at least human-shaped. It knows we are looking."

He paused for a moment, then added:

"The dragon seems to be a Devil, too. The rats are a Cursed Beast… the entire swarm of them feels like a single entity."

Sunny remained silent, thinking.

A Cursed Devil to the north, a Cursed Devil to the south, and a

Cursed Beast to the east.

Things looked quite bleak.

He was hardly in a shape to fight, and most of his shades could not be summoned yet. Slayer was in a rough state, too… her situation was worse than his, really. Just like Sunny, she could not move one of her arms, which meant that she could not draw her bow.

There was a day left before the three Cursed abominations descended upon the Shrine of Truth. The odds would not be any better tomorrow, either.

Kai looked at him tensely.

"How are we going to repel this attack?"

Sunny lingered for a while, then smiled.

"Well, the answer is simple."

He glanced at Kai and shrugged, wincing from the pain of his mangled arm moving up and down.

"We won't."

As Kai looked at him silently, Sunny shook his head.

"I am not fighting two Cursed Devils and a Cursed Beast. So, instead of waiting for them to come…"

He glanced east.

"We will attack, instead."

He had come to the Shrine of Truth to make his warriors stronger. And he accomplished just that — with the jade figures in his possession, Slayer and Kai would receive the third ash augmentation. As long as his Will empowered them, that would make them as deadly as any Great Nightmare Creature.

More than that, his army — as long as it was given time to repair

itself — now consisted of two Sacred shades and two groups of Great Shades. The Snow Tyrant, meanwhile, only had two Devils and one Beast left. It was actually at a disadvantage in terms of pure numbers.

What a startling reversal it was, considering its overwhelming numerical advantage at the start.

More importantly, the Snow Tyrant had to send all of the figures that had been protecting it into battle.

Which meant that it was almost defenseless.

So, there was no point in staying in the Shrine of Truth anymore. Sunny had the enemy where he wanted.

Inhaling deeply, he summoned the few Obsidian Wasps that had already mended themselves and sent them off to dig out soul shards from the remains of the dead Cursed Monster.

Then, he turned to Kai.

"Prepare yourself. We'll be fighting another god in the evening."

It was time to do some rat hunting.

'Thank the gods!'

...He would finally have something to eat.

Chapter-2381: End of the Hunt

It was the dead of night when Sunny and Kai returned to the temple. Slayer was still resting, so he simply placed one of the jade figurines next to her and handed the other one to Kai.

The last one, though… that last one, he kept to himself.

The Shrine was tilted and drowning in lava, so placing the figures on the altar was an awkward task. Still, Kai could fly, so it did not pose much of a problem. As the third ring of ash was forming around his soul core, Sunny left once again, threw a wary look at the eerie sculptures rising from the lake of lava, and made his sacrifice.

This was going to be the last truth he would learn before slaying the Snow Tyrant. They were going to leave the Shrine of Truth in a few hours, which meant that even if another abomination fell to their blades, he would only be able to make another offering after conquering the Snow Castle — if it was similar to the castle of Ash.

Sunny was not sure what would happen after the Tyrant died, so there was even a possibility that this was going to be the last truth he would receive as a reward in this accursed game.

He took a deep breath.

The figure of the Snow Demon drowned in the lava, and Sunny found himself somewhere else once again.

But this truth was unlike the rest.

Sunny was in pain.

His nebulous body was being eaten alive by a harrowing curse, his secretive mind was being consumed by vicious illusions. His heart was being torn apart by indescribable dread, and his very spirit was

broken, his will and desire to live ripped from it by a cruel hand.

There was no solace for him, no reprieve.

No choice but to die.

And yet, he refused to. He staggered, walking across the sand with unsteady steps, surrounded by darkness. Somewhere above, the ebony sky shimmered with the light of a myriad of silver stars, but their pale radiance was not enough to illuminate the shadowy valley, let alone warm his mangled, freezing body.

Blood was flowing out of his mouth, spilling through the fangs of his mask as it shone with a beautiful golden light… with the light of divinity.

Radiant blood was flowing out of the wounds littering his body, too, soaking the fabric of his dark mantle.

Step. Step. Another step.

Sunny was running out of steps he was fated to make. There were only a few left.

"Aahhhh…"

A groan slipped from his lips, its subtle sound distorted by the mask.

Then, another sound came.

The sound of leaves rustling under the foot of a predator. The sound of graceful wings parting the night sky.

The sound of an arrow piercing the fabric of fate.

The arrowhead hit him in the neck, and he was thrown to the ground.

Sunny fell to his knees, the drops of golden blood shining like precious gems on the sand. Raising a hand, he grasped the smooth black wood of the arrow's shaft — not too dissimilar to the polished wooden surface of his mask — and pulled the arrow out, shattering it

in his grip.

The firm hand of the archer who had sent the arrow flying was much too weak to harm a being such as him. It only managed to pierce his flesh because there had already been a wound there, on his neck, left by a far more dreadful foe.

The arrow was of no consequence…

The legendary poison smeared on its tip, however, was anything but. It was a poison that was not supposed to exist in the world anymore, and yet, here it was.

A chilling cold spread through his body with harrowing speed. Then, it invaded his soul, his mind, and his spirit.

Suddenly, Sunny felt weak.

He even found it difficult to keep his eyes open. His broken body shuddered.

Cold, cold.

He was cold, and alone.

He was going to leave alone, unwitnessed… just like he had lived. No one would even remember that he existed at all.

Death was coming.

It came in the sound of soft steps, taking the form of a woman who walked quietly out from the darkness. The woman wore battered dark armor and a veil that covered her beautiful face, her long, luscious hair tied into a braid.

The starlit night cast a deep shadow onto her, but he could see her cold eyes clearly.

He could see his reflection in them, too.

A nebulous figure shrouded by a tattered mantle, a mask of black polished wood covering its face.

He was Weaver, the Demon of Fate.

The mighty, terrible daemon…

That mighty daemon was now kneeling in front of a mortal huntress.

A stifled laugh escaped from the daemon's lips, made strange and elusive by the mask.

"You Nine… ah, how we loathe you…"

The Demon of Fate knew the endless despair of struggling against Fate better than anyone else.

The Nine were nothing but pitiful mortals, but they were also fated. Their lives were a convergence of fate. To anyone else, they would seem tiny and pitiful, no more than vermin… but to Weaver, who could see the great tapestry of fate, their figures towered like those of giants, looming above, oppressing Weaver with their crushing weight.

The woman looked down at the daemon silently.

The daemon smiled behind the mask.

"It was your doing, wasn't it? Oh, what a wicked trap you set for us. We have escaped our siblings… but it seems that we've failed to escape you, in the end."

The daemon knew the woman well. She had been stalking Weaver for a long time, this mortal with a pure soul. Sometimes, she came as a beast. Sometimes, she came as a huntress. The daemon had not seen her moving stealthily across the realms, enduring battle after battle all in order to grow stronger… but they had felt her figure growing closer and closer in the tapestry of fate, constricting them like a serpent.

Until they could not move at all, and there was nowhere to go.

Finally, the woman spoke.

The daemon had thought that her voice would be triumphant, but it was simply tired.

"I know what you are."

The daemon was tired, too.

"If you know what we are, then you know what destroying us means. There is a price that has to be paid for slaying a daemon. Are you prepared to pay that price?"

The woman did not answer.

The daemon let out a long, sorrowful sigh.

"You know nothing, child. You poor girl... it is too late. Please forgive me, if you can."

The woman unsheathed her sword then and plunged it into the daemon's chest in one fluid, swift motion. There was no hesitation in her strike, and no mercy.

That nebulous figure fell to the ground, lifeless.

The black mask stared blindly at the starlit sky, then fell apart into a hurricane of sparks.

The huntress sighed deeply and looked at the sky.

At long last, her task was finished.

She swayed lightly and raised a hand, touching her veil in confusion.

Her lips moved subtly, producing a barely audible whisper.

"…What task?"

Chapter-2382: Wrath of Mortals

Just before the sun touched the horizon, Kai joined Sunny on the roof of the Shrine of Truth. He looked ready for battle, the arrows bristling with the black feathers of their fletching in his quiver. Summoning the outer layers of his armor, the archer inhaled deeply and looked east.

"Lady Slayer has received the third boon of the Ash Domain. We seem to be ready."

Sunny nodded slowly, a distant expression on his face.

"...Has she now?"

Kai nodded.

"Yes. Why? Your voice... it sounded a little strange."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"She is set to play a decisive role in this battle. I've just been wondering… about how capable she truly is."

Kai studied him a bit.

"What is on your mind?"

Sunny smiled faintly and looked at the towering mountain to the east, its peak covered in snow.

Eventually, he said:

"Well, the Cursed Beast we'll be fighting tonight is a swarm of rats. They are infected by Corruption now, but that means that they weren't at some point. Which means that there was a swarm of Sacred rats once upon a time. Isn't it strange?"

Kai blinked a few times, prompting Sunny to chuckle quietly.

"I mean, it's one weird deity, don't you think? Who would want to worship a swarm of rats?"

His friend tilted his head a little.

"Actually, you are right. I have not considered it from that point of view."

Sunny shook his head.

"But then again, who said that Sacred beings have to be worthy of worship? Conflating divine power and benevolence is a very modern way of thinking about things. Actually, for most of history, people had not worshiped gods out of love or gratitude. Rather, they did so to placate and mollify the deities, hoping to avoid drawing their ire."

He smiled.

"After all, mortals can't survive the wrath of gods. Not the other way around."

At that moment, Slayer emerged from the Shrine, still shrouded in ghostly smoke and cradling her mangled arm. Sunny studied her with a dark expression.

"...Or at least it's not supposed to be."

This Shadow of his… ah, she was definitely an overachiever.

Sunny had a lot to think about and a lot to say, but he did not have any time for that at the moment. Instead, he looked at Kai and said:

"Prepare yourself to feel weaker than you are now. We'll be invading the Snow Domain once again, after all. You remember the plan, right?"

Kai nodded somberly.

"I do. Leave it to me."

Sunny looked west, where the sun had just touched the horizon, painting the sea of clouds in a million shades of crimson.

"Let's go, then."

The volcano — what was left of it — shuddered. The fantastical scene of ethereal obsidian bridges forming from the plumes of ash played out once more, just as breathtaking and beautiful as it had been in the past. But after seeing it so many times already, Sunny paid little attention to the great bridges that spanned the sea of clouds.

Instead, he turned himself into a shadow… and wrapped himself around Slayer.

Immediately, he felt himself fusing into her ragged, battered form.

A sense of ferocious power and cold confidence filled him, as well as of a sharp and merciless killing intent — much similar to his own, but also different. Subtle, determined… inescapable. He could vaguely sense Slayer's thoughts and emotions, all of them painted in hues of grey by her sinister, dark resolve.

There was a certain… purity to her feelings that he did not share. Her black heart might have been filled with nothing but malice and desire to kill, but that malice and that yearning were pure, unblemished, and pristine.

Sunny could not really read the thoughts of his Shadows when fusing with them, but he could usually sense fragmented echoes of what they were thinking about, sometimes even see glimpses of their subdued, distant, dreamlike memories. In the case of Slayer, though, he could sense none of the latter…

Just a vague impression of a vast emptiness, impenetrable darkness, and of an imperative need to hunt… to kill. The sound of the wind howling across the obsidian dunes, the deadly beauty of annihilating essence storms…

As if Slayer had only ever existed in the Shadow Realm, and that was the only thing she had ever known.

On a purely physical level, fusing with Slayer was an exquisite

experience. She was different from both the indomitable Saint and the mighty Fiend — hers was a graceful, subtle kind of strength. She was nimble and agile like a dancer, but at the same time ruthless and ferocious like a prowling predator.

Sunny himself followed a somewhat similar path. The origin of his battle art had been a beautiful dance, after all — so, he could appreciate Slayer's deadly grace and fierce litheness.

As soon as Sunny took Slayer into his dark embrace, he could feel a raging torrent of power flow into her body. This Shadow of his had already been enhanced by three consecutive infusions of mystical ash, and now, she was augmented by the power of shadows, as well. The result was quite frightening.

That said, Slayer was still not in her best shape.

She was severely wounded, and Sunny was as well. Neither of them made for a good fighter at the moment, but together… together, they could easily pass as one.

That was why Sunny had decided to guide her in this battle instead of participating in it himself.

'Well… good luck to us, I guess.'

Behind them, Kai's voice boomed, as if commanding the world:

"Be strong!"

And with it, Slayer and Sunny suddenly felt empowered even more.

There was no time to waste, so Sunny did not waste any by sending her running across the obsidian bridge. Instead, he commanded the shadows to open before Slayer, and as she stepped forward, the two of them emerged from the darkness directly on the slope of the distant mountain.

One of Slayer's swords left its sheath with a quiet hiss.

In the next moment, the pristine white snow around them boiled, and countless feral rats rushed at them like a writhing avalanche of rotten

fur and sharp, needle-like fangs.

Chapter-2383: Lord of Rats

For a moment, Sunny was disoriented.

Slayer's senses were difficult to get used to. Each of her five senses was vastly superior and far sharper than his own — except for his touch, which had been elevated by Bone Weave a long time ago. Fusing with Slayer was like stepping into a world overflowing with an endless complexity of sounds, scents, flavors, and starkly vivid images.

It would have been overwhelming if not for the fact that Sunny had developed a staggering capacity to grasp and absorb new information over the years, as well as while rising in Rank. Still, Slayer possessed more senses than the mundane five, as well — a primitive version of shadow sense, for example, and others that Sunny could not even name.

And there were a myriad of abominable rats moving simultaneously all around them now. There was the Will of a Cursed Beast bending the world, and the rules of Ariel's Game sapping Slayer of strength.

It was enough to send Sunny reeling for a split second.

'So many...'

Slayer, however, was already moving.

As an avalanche of writing rats descended upon them, she bared her teeth behind her torn veil and dashed forward to meet them. Her black eyes glistened with the cold bloodlust of a merciless predator, and ghostly smoke trailed behind her like a billowing mantle.

At that moment, Sunny felt something strange — something he had never felt before while embracing Slayer as a shadow.

The flow of her essence changed, moving awkwardly in a way that was not supposed to be possible… but also purposefully, as if she was remembering something that had been second nature to her once, but was then covered by rust as the years passed.

Like she was attempting to channel her radiant soul essence into the sharp blade of her sword — not to satiate its spellweave and activate its enchantments, but simply to saturate the cold steel with it as she would her body.

She failed to achieve whatever it was she was trying to remember, but just barely.

So, Slayer activated the enchantment woven into her sword instead.

Sunny had crafted two short swords for his murderous Shadow — one from the metal of the great chains holding up the Chained Isles, one from a splinter of bone from Godgrave. Both were enchanted to be chillingly sharp and incredibly durable, as well as to return to her hand if she ever lost them.

The sheaths of the twin swords were also enchanted, meant to mend the blades in case they were damaged.

There was a difference between the two swords, though. The active enchantment of the one carved from bone coated the blade with an invisible layer of penetrating force, which was meant to allow it to pierce the toughest of armors. The active enchantment of the one forged from metal, on the other hand, was not meant to pierce. It was meant to sever.

The enchantment generated a field of fearsome force and then folded it into a razor-thin plane that extended forward along the path the blade traveled.

Unlike his other Shadows, Slayer could not change her size at will — compared to the gargantuan Nightmare Creatures Sunny routinely faced, she was entirely tiny. So, he had thought of giving her a blade to cut down giants. Its blade was short, but the invisible severing field would be as immense as Slayer could muster.

The enchantment was meant to be used against titanic foes, but it was quite useful against vast swarms of vermin as well.

As the short sword cut the air with a hiss, the fabric of the world seemed severed along its path. Empowered by Slayer's raging, radiant essence, the cut cleaved a hundred-meter gash into the descending mass of rats, obliterating thousands of them. Blood, viscera, and pieces of pulverized bodies were sent flying high into the air, and a crimson haze suddenly enveloped the slope of the mountain, painting the snow red.

Each of the rats was technically a part of a Cursed being, but there were three rings of ash around Slayer's incomplete core now, fully saturated by Sunny's Supreme will, while Slayer herself was augmented by his dark embrace. So, even while weakened by the Snow Domain, she had no trouble destroying the small creatures.

That was the result of coming to the Shrine of Truth.

There was something wrong… something deeply wrong… happening to the rat swarm, though.

Sunny sensed the eerie, unfathomable Will of the Cursed Beast swelling for a moment, and then, he sensed something that sent a chill running down his spine… metaphorically speaking. Sunny did not possess a spine at the moment, and Slayer was not the kind of being to be disturbed by anything.

There were countless rats on the mountain — they had been gnawing on it, slowly eating away at its stone roots, before rushing to devour Slayer. The rats were countless, and yet, Sunny had still expected to feel their number lessen a little when Slayer destroyed a few thousand.

And yet, he felt the opposite.

In place of the thousands of slain rats, even more seemed to suddenly appear out of nowhere. The remains of their fallen kin were instantly consumed, and the swarm swelled, increasing in number.

It was then that Sunny intuitively confirmed the essence of his foe.

He had harbored a suspicion even before stepping on the snow-covered slope of the mountain, but now, he was sure of it.

And that only made him feel more wary.

'So I was right, after all. Damnation...'

In a sense, the rat swarm — the Rat King — was similar to Abundance. It also pursued endlessness, but while Abundance did so by wielding infinity, the Rat King did so by wielding… propagation.

The concept the Rat King personified was numerousness. Perhaps there had been a single Sacred rat once, a long time ago, but as time went on and it was consumed by Corruption, there were many. And then, there was a myriad.

In short, for every rat Slayer and Sunny destroyed…

Two were going to take its place.

'Ah… that doesn't bode well.'

Chapter-2384: Rat Legion

The only thing worse than a profane legion of Cursed rats… was a profane legion of Cursed rats that grew larger and larger the more you killed them.

'D—disgusting…'

Sunny did not really have any negative feelings towards rats. In fact, he found them to be quite admirable creatures… kindred spirits, even. Abominable rats whose flesh and souls were twisted by the appalling darkness of Corruption, though, were an entirely different issue.

Currently, an avalanche of these repulsive vermin was about to swallow him and Slayer, and worse of all, there was no obvious way to defeat them.

Luckily, Sunny always planned contingencies, and today was not an exception.

His plan A was to simply annihilate the swarm of rats in battle.

His plan B, though, had been developed precisely in case the swarm of rats proved to be too immense to be eradicated with pure violence.

'I hope Kai does well…'

The avalanche of Cursed rats was almost upon them when Slayer slashed her sword again, cleaving a wide path through it. She dashed forward, moving through the crimson haze, as the rats flowed past them on both sides.

The murderous Shadow remained calm — gleeful, even — but Sunny felt a strong desire to shudder.

There were too many rats rushing down the slope of the mountain for each of the vermin to run on the ground, so they simply climbed atop of each other in a demented frenzy. Their mass formed towering walls on both sides of Slayer, rolling past her like a real avalanche of writhing grey bodies, frenzied eyes, and needle-sharp teeth.

The worst part of it all was that the breach created in the rat swarm by Slayer's strike was swiftly closing as the old rats mindlessly pushed forward and the new rats came into existence, threatening to bury her under their squirming mass.

And since the whole mountain was infested by the innumerable swarm, there was nowhere for her to escape.

At that moment, an arrow struck the mountain higher up the slope, instantly causing a titanic explosion. A devastating mixture of light, heat, and sound pulverized countless rats, clearing a wide circle of bare rock from them.

As countless tons of snow were displaced by the explosion and an actual avalanche rolled down, Sunny opened a path through the shadows for Slayer. Before the wall of rats looming above them toppled and buried her, she stepped through the shadows and escaped into the safe circle created by Kai's arrow.

The shallow crater left by the explosion was surrounded by the walls of frenzied rats, as well, and was only destined to exist for a few moments.

Before it was erased by the carpet of grey bodies, Slayer cleaved a path through the rats again. And before that path was swallowed by the swarm, a second arrow fell some distance away, causing another explosion and clearing another patch of empty land.

The carnage continued. The writhing mass of grey bodies flowed like a flood, devouring the entire mountain, while Slayer moved through it and brandished her sword. Arrows rained down on the quaking peak like a heavy artillery bombardment, pulverizing countless rats. Slayer's blade cut down even more, and the stench of blood permeated the air.

The mountain would have become like a hideous, dreadful slaughterhouse if not for the fact that torn, bleeding remains of countless rats were immediately devoured by their numerous brethren… who only grew more numerous as moments flew by, enraged and emboldened by the nightmarish carnage.

Sunny was, honestly… at a loss.

He had rarely encountered an enemy who grew exponentially stronger the more it was slaughtered, eviscerated, and killed. Slayer and Kai were dealing grievous wounds to the swarm, but the more wounds they dealt, the vaster the swarm became.

'What a vicious little menace...'

He was not sure what role he was supposed to play in this battle, apart from opening paths through the shadows for Slayer.

Abundance had possessed a singular vessel, at least. Sunny had not been able to suppress its Will, but he managed to slowly poison it with his own. Additionally, he prepared tools to disarm the gargantuan worm in advance.

The rats, however, were countless. There was no single vessel for him to target, and therefore, he was not sure how to suppress the concept of ceaseless propagation that the swarm embodied. Neither did he know what opposite concept he could have channeled if not for his role of augmenting Slayer.

And he did not have much time to think… time was not on his side, after all.

Not only would Sunny have to retreat once the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, but the swarm would simply become so vast as to be inescapable long before that.

He even considered using that very power of the Rat King against it. What if he inflated the number of rats on the mountain to such a degree that the entire mountain collapsed under their weight? There was certainly a poetic lesson hidden in that approach, and it could have even worked in some other circumstances…

But not now.

After all, Sunny needed the mountain to remain standing, because he could not conquer it if the mountain was gone.

And if he failed to conquer the mountain, two Cursed Devils would descend upon him come morning.

That was a clash he wanted to avoid at all costs.

So, in the absence of a clear way to defeat the vile swarm of Cursed rats…

Sunny could only put his faith in Kai.

'Come on, buddy. You can do it.'

He had left Kai on the roof of the Shrine of Truth for a reason. Sunny had suspected that the Cursed Beast would possess a power that defied reason, and he had also suspected that its power would have something to do with numbers. Something like that was not difficult to guess, after all, because the worst part about a swarm of enemies… was that they were a swarm.

And the world almost never failed to deliver on its worst promises.

So, Sunny had given Kai a special task. He wanted to exploit the power of the Snow Tyrant against its emissary…

Kai had to find the invisible string with which the Tyrant controlled its Beast.

Chapter-2385: Pure Soul

Sunny reasoned that the Rat King could not be merely a swarm of mindless vermin — he had battled hordes of abominations before, and they were not at all like the enemy he faced today. The entity he was facing was indeed a swarm, but one guided by a single Will.

Which hinted that there was a single source of that Will — the origin of the innumerable legion of abominable rats that lusted to devour Slayer in frenzied hunger. Even if there had not been, the Snow Tyrant would have forced it upon the Rat King…

After all, it needed to control the Snow Beast figure somehow, and Sunny doubted that his adversary could freely create an endless number of invisible strings to subjugate each individual rat.

So, he had theorized that there would be a single string, connected to a single rat. That rat was the commander of the Rat Legion, hidden somewhere in the dreadful sea of squirming vermin — the vessel through which the Snow Tyrant controlled the Cursed Beast, as well as its source.

Finding a single rat among myriads seemed like an impossible task… it was much harder than finding a needle in a haystack, to say the least. After all, neither the needle nor the haystack was supposed to move, let alone seethe and writhe in mad bloodlust on the quaking slopes of a crumbling mountain.

But if anyone could accomplish that task, it was Kai.

He had been the first of them to notice the existence of the invisible strings, after all. Sunny himself was not even sure that he was capable of perceiving them — but Kai could.

And although he was not capable of differentiating the original rat from its countless brethren, he could catch a glimpse of the Snow

Tyrant's string again. And then… he could follow it to the target.

That was how Sunny intended to use his enemy's own power against them.

The problem, of course…

Was that he and Slayer had to survive long enough for Kai to succeed.

And that was not only difficult, but also continued to get harder and harder with each moment.

Slayer was like a dark hurricane, moving across the mountain in a whirlwind of blood and torn flesh. She had already been a force to be reckoned with in the past — a malevolent, sinister force — but now that she was empowered by shadows and ash, wielding enchanted weapons forged by the Sovereign of Death himself, her chilling malice was simply awesome to behold.

The mountain was covered by the swarming rats entirely, so Slayer could only exist in the wake of staggering slaughter. She had to carve a path for herself with her severing blade, and when that was not enough, she had to escape into the small islands of fleeting safety created by Kai's destructive bombardment. Sunny guided her through the shadows, matching the frenetic cadence of the terrifying battle.

The carnage was unimaginable. The sight of it all — the crimson blaze of the sunset, the dark writhing walls of vermin closing in on them like mudslides, the plumes of fine red haze drifting on the wind — was unbelievable.

The noise, however, was the worst — the ear-piercing, deafening cacophony of sounds produced by the myriad of frenzied rats was hideous, appalling, and utterly indescribable… especially so because Slayer's hearing was incredibly sharp, capable of catching the sound of a needle dropping many kilometers away.

It was to the point that Sunny thought that he was hallucinating, hearing a hum of demented voices being born from the rustle of countless vermin rushing to tear his Shadow apart. Those voices were

not voices, and the words they spoke were not words… and yet, somehow, he could still faintly understand them, at least at times.

"Hungry… hungry… we are hungry… we are... hunger…"

That was what he imagined he heard, repeated a myriad times by the myriad of frenzied voices, until it lost meaning.

Slayer moved without reprieve, dancing in the gaps between the tendrils of the swarm that aimed to consume her. Her movements were swift and graceful, but the carnage she unleashed was utterly barbaric, slowly painting the whole mountain red. Sunny was appalled by the ghastly scale of the violence she was perpetrating… but at the same time, he found himself being enthralled by it.

It was truly a joy, to witness a master doing what they were best at — to experience it all as they were experiencing it, feeling each step, muscle contraction, and reverberation of the sword.

He was quite familiar with Slayer's battle style by now, and yet, he had never felt her going all out like this before. Now that Sunny had the first row to the dark spectacle of it all, he could discern subtler details about the way his Shadow wielded her blade.

There was a certain… sincerity to the way Slayer fought. He had noted how pure her emotion seemed, and that purity translated to her every move. There was no pretense, no hesitation to her macabre dance — just sincere, pure, and adamant resolve to maim, mangle, and kill.

Which was not to say that Slayer's battle style was unsophisticated or blunt — far from it. It was nothing short of beautiful.

She was just devoted fully to her every motion without holding anything back.

Her intent and her actions were flawlessly the same.

It was a strange state of being, one that was alien to Sunny… and would be to most humans, as well. After all, humans had countless thoughts and countless experiences. Such a degree of single-minded certainty was impossible for most, if not all, and would only be

harmful otherwise.

But Slayer made it work. In fact, she made it work splendidly.

The sincerity of her resolve influenced how efficiently she could wield the Will, as well. Since there was no barrier between her intent and her actions, nothing was wasted in translation — as a result, she could achieve far more with far less, displaying a level of resourcefulness and efficacy that Sunny found wondrous.

She wielded the Will with incredible finesse.

That was why Slayer and Sunny were still alive, and relatively unscathed.

However…

With every moment that passed, the swarm grew.

The paths Slayer cleaved in the mass of writhing rats grew narrower, the time the gaps existed grew shorter, and the walls of vermin surrounding them grew taller.

Sunny was not sure how much longer they would be able to last before the Rat King buried them under its revolting mass.

'Come on, Kai…'

Chapter-2386: Rat Race

When the end came, it came suddenly.

Slayer was rushing through a gap between two tides of vermin, her sword hissing as it flew at incredible speed, slicing apart individual rats who had managed to jump at her from the writhing mass of their brethren.

The path she had cleaved was about to disappear, and there was nowhere for them to retreat to — Kai was late with his next arrow, so no island of safety had been created by a powerful explosion.

Slayer was already pouring essence into her sword, preparing to activate its enchantment immediately after using it a split second ago, already — it was wasteful and dangerous, but they were short on choices.

It was then that Sunny felt a condensed and oppressive mass of barely contained power rushing at them from behind at terrible speed.

Almost at the same time, he sensed a swift shadow flying across the obsidian bridge… the shadow of an arrow.

In the next moment, the arrow flashed above their heads and struck the mountain close to the peak.

There was no fiery explosion, this time…

But what followed next was several magnitudes more violent.

The mountain shuddered as an incredible amount of concussive force and sound was released in an instant. A myriad of rats were instantly pulverized by the devastating shockwave, turning into a crimson haze. More than that, there was no island of safety created on the

slope this time — instead, the impregnable stone simply shattered, and countless tons of it were thrown high into the air.

The fountain of shattered stone extended into the sky, expanding as it rose.

Then came the deafening roar of the impact and the powerful tremors that made several sections of the fractured slope collapse.

The damage near the peak was much worse, though.

In fact, the entire peak was obliterated, crumbling under its own weight and plummeting down. A colossal rockfall turned the western face of the mountain into a scene of chaotic devastation, billowing clouds of dust obscuring the view as countless rats were crushed and buried under the enormous boulders.

Then, the debris that had been sent flying into the sky rained down, pulverizing even more.

…That was the result of Kai using the final enchantment of the Supreme bow Sunny had crafted for him — the tried and tested [Death Dealer], modified to incorporate his latest insights into weaving.

Kai had to have poured most of his essence into this one shot, sending his most deadly arrow fly.

And there was only one reason he would have done that.

Sunny wanted to grin.

The destruction of the peak of the mountain, the numerous rats destroyed by the initial impact and the rockfall that followed… all of it was merely a side effect. Kai's true target was a single rat — the source of the Rat King.

He must have found the invisible string and traced it to the source rat's back.

After that, his task was simple… he had to hit that single moving rat among a million identical vermin, from dozens of kilometers away.

What could have been simpler than that?

And he did.

Sunny was sure of it, because he could already sense the behavior of the swarm changing.

His heart was filled with vicious glee.

The first change was somewhat subtle and hard to describe. The rats were not disoriented, and the Will of the swarm did not diminish in its dreadful, oppressive power — but it became wilder and more unbridled, losing all pretenses of guidance. That was because the rat swarm had escaped from under Snow Tyrant's control.

The second change was far more impactful, though.

It only took Sunny a moment to realize that there was something lacking. And when he concentrated on that stark absence, he realized that no new rats had appeared to replace the ones killed by the rockfall.

With the death of its progenitor, the swarm ceased its endless growth. The Rat King was Rat King no more… now, it was merely a vast horde of starving abominations.

And these abominations were already starting to devour each other.

Sunny wasted a heartbeat observing the harrowing sight of a myriad of rats lunging at each other to rip each other apart.

Perhaps if this was allowed to continue, if all the countless rats were given a chance to devour each other… then, at the end, a new Rat King would have been born. A single abominable creature who had feasted on the flesh of its kin, and absorbed the essence of the entire swarm to become the source of a new rat plague.

But Sunny and Slayer were here to prevent that from happening.

Well… mostly Slayer.

'Come on! Hurry!'

She did not make Sunny ask twice.

Before the violent tremors shaking the mountain could cease, and long before the dust of the colossal rockfall settled, Slayer had already resumed her barbarous slaughter. She was almost gleeful, eviscerating vast swathes of the frenzied vermin with each graceful swing of her sword.

This time, the gaps cleaved in the swarm by her blade closed much slower. And after a while, they did not close at all.

Soon enough, Kai joined them, as well. He arrived in the shape of a dragon, blasting the slopes of the mountain with the sonic booms of his haunting songs.

The sun was swiftly falling behind the horizon, and the mountain was groaning, barely supporting its own weight — after all, the rats had gnawed on it in their hunger, eating away at its roots.

Sunny, Slayer, and Kai were racing against time.

There were too many rats to kill, some of them buried under the stone debris, but still alive. Perhaps they would have failed to clean every single one of them up, but luckily, Kai's vision could penetrate the slopes of the mountain, while Sunny's shadow sense could envelop the mountain whole.

In the end, he separated himself from Slayer and poured his essence out, manifesting countless shadows to finish off the remaining stragglers.

And then, just before the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, Sunny finally heard it…

[You have slain an enemy.]

Letting out a long sigh, he sat on the ground and looked west.

The battle against the Cursed Beast, the Rat King, was over.

They won.

Chapter-2387: Godmeat

Just before the last vestige of the setting sun drowned in the sea of fiery clouds, Sunny took a deep breath and looked at Slayer.

Surrounded by wisps of ghostly smoke, she was cleaning the blade of her sword. His Shadow seemed… tattered, a little. One of her arms was still mangled and hanging limply, her armor was shredded, and even her veil was torn.

Behind the veil was a face that Sunny knew all too well now — the beautiful face of the woman he had seen in the visions... or rather, a version of it seemingly carved from flawlessly black obsidian.

She was the relentless huntress whose fate it had been to slay the Demon of Fate. Her shadow, at least.

...Granted, even after learning the unbelievable truth of Slayer's past, Sunny had his doubts about its veracity. Weaver was the master of deceit, after all. Was it beyond that nebulous scoundrel to sneak a lie into the game their brother designed to reveal only the truth?

He did not know.

Not that it mattered...

With a sigh, Sunny threw one last glance at Slayer and commanded the shadows to open, pulling her into their dark depths.

A moment later, she vanished from the devastated slope of the mountain.

Just as the ethereal bridge connecting it to the distant Shrine of Truth crumbled into ash, her graceful figure appeared far away, on the tilted roof of the drowning temple.

Kai landed on the ground near Sunny as the mountain quaked, rivers of lava flowing out of its shattered peak to announce the end of the Ash Domain's move.

He looked west with a startled expression.

"...Sunny?"

Sunny let out another sigh and sat up, rubbing his face with his one functioning hand. He remained silent for a few moments, then smiled tiredly.

"Don't worry. I am not leaving our resident psychopath for dead."

With the move finished, he could not sense the shadows covering the lake of lava anymore. Neither could he see Slayer from this distance… but he knew that she was there, standing alone on the roof of the ancient temple and looking at him.

"I have a plan, so relax."

Kai hesitated for a few moments, then sighed and sat down near Sunny, placing his bow on the ground with a trembling hand. He looked utterly exhausted, having drawn its heavy string time after time with stunning speed.

Kai had a strange expression on his face, so Sunny asked lazily:

"What's the matter? You seem a little out of it."

His friend lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"Oh, it's just that we… we killed another deity. The previous times, it was mostly your doing, but tonight, Lady Slayer and I took the lead roles. Naturally, it was only possible because of your Will and the sacrifices we made to the Altar of Truth, but still. We killed a god."

Sunny studied him for a little while, then smiled.

"That you did."

Kai exhaled slowly.

"I just feel like I should be stunned and shocked by that fact, but honestly, I am not even bothered. Witnessing deities fall… has lost its novelty, it seems. Unbelievable as that might sound."

He let out a shaky laugh.

Sunny stared at him silently, then shook his head.

"I mean… aren't you the guy who fought a flock of Spire Messengers as a Sleeper? And then jumped into the maw of a Transcendent dragon as an Awakened? Oh, and then there was the crazy stunt you pulled in Verge. Why should you be stunned, let alone shocked?"

Kai smiled shyly and scratched the tip of his nose.

"Well... true. Still, this repugnant swarm of rats was a god."

Sunny grinned, then looked around, grimacing at the stench of rat fur burning in the flowing lava.

"Speaking of which… hey, how about we barbeque some godmeat?"

Kai changed in the face, turning almost green.

"T—the rats? Eat them? T—thanks, but no thanks!"

Sunny laughed.

"Huh? Why not? You know, we mostly ate universal ration packs in the outskirts — also known as rat packs. It was all synthpaste and the driest, blandest crackers you can imagine, plus a disposable water filter. So, I actually always wanted to taste a real rat. Real rats were a rare commodity, though — the stronger kids hunted them down before the rest of us could."

Looking around, Sunny inhaled the disgusting stench of burning fur and smiled.

"Look how far I've come! Ah… dreams do come true."

Kai studied him for a while, then forced out a polite smile.

"They're… all yours, then. By all means! I'd rather not stand in the way of fulfilling your dreams."

Sunny scoffed.

'How picky.'

Kai had not wanted to eat the torn remains of the Cursed Monster because the manner of its death had been too eerie, and both halves of the monstrous corpse were too disgusting. And now, he was refusing to eat perfectly fine, if a little cursed, rats as well…

There was just no pleasing that guy!

Sunny gave Kai a look of reproach, then stood up and dusted off his tattered clothes.

"Well, suit yourself. I'm hungry, though."

Sunny might have been of the same mind as Kai regarding the eerie corpse of the Cursed Monster, but he was not going to hold himself back tonight. The poor Rat King had never managed to satiate its hunger, so it was only proper to honor its damned memory by satiating his.

He found the Beast figurine while scrounging for rat meat. And a little later, he found the sole soul shard left behind by the Rat King, as well — it had been buried under the rockfall, which was submerged in lava now, but Sunny retrieved the tiny crystal without much trouble.

…The rat meat turned out to be diseased, and maybe even cursed. It was still delicious, though, and Blood Weave made short work of the contaminants.

In hindsight, it was probably for the best that Kai had refused to partake in consuming the slain god's flesh.

There was more of it left for Sunny!

'Is his survival instinct really sharp, or have mine become completely dull?'

Sated and satisfied, Sunny returned to the western slope of the newborn volcano and sat down near Kai to watch the sun rise.

The final act of Ariel's Game was going to be decided once it did.

Chapter-2388: Lure

There used to be twelve Snow figures arrayed against the three figures of Ash on the game board. Now, only three of them remained — two Devils and the Tyrant itself.

And Sunny was half a step ahead of the Devils, as well.

The path to the Tyrant was almost clear, but there was still a chance that the Devils would pursue him. If they did, the vaguely human-shaped Tree Devil would be of no concern, since it was further south than Sunny and his companions. The dragon, however, was north of the Shrine of Truth — so, if it moved east, they would have to clash with it eventually.

Sunny wanted to avoid fighting a Cursed Devil if he could. In fact, he dreaded that battle — even if there were three Sacred shades under his command now.

So, he left Slayer in the Shrine of Truth.

It was unclear how cunning the Snow Tyrant was and how well it knew the figures of the Ash Domain. However, it had shown at least some ability to act strategically. So, it would most likely be unwilling to leave the square of the Shrine in the hands of the enemy.

Not only because the power of the Ash Domain would grow the more squares belonged to it, while the power of the Snow Domain would diminish accordingly — it was also because Sunny could easily return to the Shrine if his path to it was not cut off.

The truth of the matter was simple — the Snow Tyrant did not possess enough figures anymore to catch its enemy unless its enemy wanted to be caught. Sunny could wander the board indefinitely, playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse with the two Snow Devils. He could stall for as long as he wanted.

Until his wounds completely recovered, for example, or until all of his shades restored themselves.

Additionally, he had in his possession the jade figurine left behind by the Rat King. His power would increase even more if he was ever allowed to reach the Shrine of Truth, the Ash Castle, or — presumably — the Shrine of Fear.

He did not even have to keep Kai and Slayer with him. He could send them to wander the miniature realm of Ariel's Game on their own, conquering peak after peak until the Snow Domain lost its territorial advantage entirely.

So… Sunny was betting on the fact that at least one of the Devils would waste a move to conquer the Shrine of Truth. And to make it even more alluring for them, he left one of his figures — Slayer — on the roof of the drowning temple.

Sunny and Kai sat on the stone slope and watched the sunrise silently. There was the beautiful golden glow of dawn, and the plumes of snow freezing to turn into ethereal bridges. Neither of them spoke, still drained after the battle against the Rat King, and although a lot was going to be decided by what the Devils chose to do — or were commanded to do — both felt…

Peaceful.

Even if there were dreadful battles ahead, they were not going to happen until many days later. And although they were still imprisoned in Ariel's Game, the board was almost entirely empty of terrible Nightmare Creatures, which meant that they would not be surrounded and attacked unexpectedly.

For the first time since the Death Game started, Sunny did not feel like a cornered beast.

He inhaled deeply, enjoying the view of the radiant sun.

'Come on…'

Finally, the glass bridges were fully formed, and the Devils moved. Sunny held his breath, feeling his heart skip a beat.

'...Yes!'

A wide grin split his soot-covered face.

His prediction was coming true — and in the best possible way.

"The Tree Devil is moving east."

Kai's voice was subdued.

The human-like fiend was walking across the glass bridge, moving to the mountain directly south of their position. It was being sent on a hopeless pursuit.

The dragon, however…

Sunny did not need Kai to tell him, because he could see the dragon flying across the sea of clouds himself. The great beast looked like a tiny dot from the distance, but there was no mistake — it was flying south, toward the Shrine of Truth.

Which meant that nothing stood between Sunny and the Snow Tyrant anymore.

He smiled happily.

It was strange…

Perhaps the Snow Tyrant did not care to bar his passage. Perhaps it even wanted Sunny to come as soon as possible, before he could fully heal from his wounds — in that case, moving the dragon away and opening a clear path served the same purpose as leaving Slayer alone in the Shrine of Truth. It was a lure.

…Perhaps the Snow Tyrant simply failed to control the dragon — after all, a Cursed Devil was a being of immense power, not much inferior to its own.

In any case, the result coincided with what Sunny wanted.

"We're in the clear, Kai. We're in the clear…"

Finally, the end of the Ariel's Game was in view. There was only one battle left for them to win — the most harrowing of them all, but still the last one.

The battle against the Snow Tyrant itself.

Sunny exhaled slowly and watched the dragon fly across the vast chasm separating the two mountains.

He thought he even saw explosions bloom as Slayer set arrow after arrow flying.

And just when the dragon was about to reach the lake of lava…

Sunny narrowed his eyes and dismissed her, calling her back into the nurturing darkness of his soul.

Somewhere far away, the graceful figure of the murderous huntress dissolved into the shadows.

A few moments later, the Shrine of Truth shook as the gargantuan dragon landed on its roof. Robbed of its prey, the Cursed Devil let out a terrifying roar — its echoes traveled across the golden clouds, reaching Sunny and Kai on the slope of the distant volcano and making them tremble.

And soon after that, the Snow Domain's move was over.

Sunny let out a happy sigh and looked at Kai.

"See?"

He smiled in satisfaction.

"Let me tell you, buddy… a game has not been invented yet that I cannot cheat..."

Chapter-2389: Final March

Sunny and Kai slept like dead men in the warm cradle of ash. This time, there was no manor of shadows to shelter them — Sunny was too hurt and exhausted to raise one, and did not feel the need to do it either.

They woke up from the sounds of the dragon roaring at the setting sun. The volcano Sunny had destroyed was now a mountain once again… granted, the mountain seemed crooked and low, not at all as tall and magnificent as the snowy peaks that surrounded it.

He was faintly glad to have left a scar on the realm of Ariel's Game.

The Shrine of Truth was now encased in ice and hidden in the depths of the mountain. The dragon rested on the peak, baring its fangs at the falling sun, as if warning it not to come closer.

The sun, of course, paid it no heed.

Sunny studied the distant peak for a while, then looked at Kai and asked in a tone of contemplation:

"Do you think all dragons come from Sun God?"

Sevirax, the Ivory Dragon, was a descendant of Sun God. Granted, he was merely a Saint who could transform into one… or rather, had been. Still, all creatures except humans had either been made by the gods or were sired by those creations.

'Except for the Nothing Creatures, I guess. And the Others. And the Darkness Creatures. Also the Stone Saints. Who else? Nephilim, as well. Actually, I take it back… not all creatures were created by the gods.'

But most of them had been.

So, who had created the dragons?

Kai hesitated for a while, then shrugged.

"I am not sure. Maybe all white dragons do."

Sunny yawned, then rose to his feet and studied his unresponsive right hand for a few moments. Then, he looked west.

"Chances are we won't have to fight this particular white dragon. Are you disappointed?"

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? Why would I be disappointed?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, don't you want to add a third dragon to your collection?"

Kai studied him with a sour expression, then shook his head lightly.

"I am not greedy. You are welcome to take this one, if you want."

Sunny grinned.

"Thank you kindly! I'd rather not."

He was indeed a little envious of Kai the Dragonslayer because of his glorious track record. How was it fair that Kai went around slaying dragons, while Sunny was stuck with rats, worms, and the like?

That hint of envy was far too slight to survive the sight of a Cursed Devil, though. So, Sunny had no desire to battle this particular dragon.

He sighed.

"Let's go. We'll be leaving this place soon."

At this point, Sunny had a choice to make. He could reach the Snow Tyrant in five moves at the earliest — coincidentally, that was also how long his shades would take to repair themselves. Slayer was

most likely going to heal from her wounds in that time, as well.

Sunny did not see a lot of sense in delaying the final battle, so he was leaning toward taking the shortest path. There were three routes that would take him to the Snow Castle in five moves… and he did not have to take just one.

He could just as easily travel east to the Axis Tree, and then turn north. Kai, meanwhile, could travel north to the edge of the board, then turn east. That way, they would reach the Snow Castle at the same time — with the added bonus of possibly bringing four volcanoes into the Ash Domain.

That was an alluring prospect…

But it was also too risky.

After all, Sunny was only assuming that the Snow Tyrant remained in the Snow Castle. If it had left the heart of the Snow Domain, though…

Then sending Kai out alone could mean sending him to die.

They could only see the neighboring mountains, after all. If the Snow Tyrant was waiting in ambush one peak over, or just happened to be in the way by chance, then there would be no chance for Kai to escape… not as long as one of the Devils chose to pursue him instead of Sunny, at least.

So, Sunny had to swallow his regret and abandon the plan of potentially expanding the territory of the Ash Domain. The two of them were going to stay together until the very end… for better or for worse.

"Ah. Am I not the best friend in the world?"

Hearing that sudden proclamation, Kai gave him a sidelong glance, but wisely chose to remain silent.

'I knew he would agree!'

Sunny was delighted.

They left the volcano at dusk and moved east, coming in sight of the Axis Tree once again. The mountain where they had killed Abundance was now to their right… to their left was the unexplored half of the game board that belonged to the Snow Tyrant.

In the morning, the Tree Devil and the Cursed Dragon both moved east in pursuit. Watching the mountain where the Rat King had died become covered by snow, Sunny could not help but feel uneasy.

He found it hard to believe that Kai would not end up fighting the Cursed Dragon, somehow.

But then, he had to remind himself of one simple fact.

…Not everyone was Fated.

In fact, very few beings were, and Kai was not one of them. He could end up facing the Cursed Dragon by some improbable twist of fate, or not. Actually, Sunny himself was not Fated anymore either, so the odds were in their favor.

The only probable future in which they would be forced to fight the dragon… was if they failed to kill the Snow Tyrant and had to retreat. Then, the Tyrant and its two Devils would descend upon them together, and they would die.

'There is no way back, only forward. Failure means death. The enemy is overwhelmingly powerful, and mistakes are not allowed… ah, how nostalgic!'

Sunny smiled faintly, knowing that he was staring death in the face.

That felt like home. After all, he was the Sovereign of Death.

The next evening, as the falling sun set the sea of clouds ablaze, Kai and Sunny crossed the obsidian bridge and set foot on the titanic branch of the Axis Tree.

They had reached the very heart of Ariel's Game.

Chapter-2390: Ye Mighty

The Axis Tree was so vast that it could only be perceived as a place, not as a thing. After all, it towered higher than the great peaks of Ariel's Game, which were already taller than any mountain on Earth — the branch Sunny and Kai were standing on was many kilometers long and as wide as a field, the ridges of the bark covering it more than spacious enough for two people to walk on.

A complicated tangle of similarly colossal branches extended far down and high up, creating a dizzying three-dimensional labyrinth. A whole nation could have made their home on the branches of this great tree… today, however, Sunny and Kai were the only people populating its desolate immensity.

The sun had just disappeared beyond the horizon, and although the sea of clouds still glowed with the last vestiges of a dreamlike crimson sheen, the night was already enveloping the world with a veil of velvet darkness.

The world was still, but it was not silent. Instead, it was permeated by the soothing murmur of flowing water.

The Axis Tree had been covered in snow just a few moments ago. Now, the snow was melting, torrents of cold water cascading down the vast maze of titanic branches in a series of clear waterfalls. Sunny had expected ash and lava to replace it, but to his surprise, nothing of the sort happened.

Instead, the great tree was simply stripped of its white mantle and left bare, its naked branches swaying gently in the wind. There were no leaves, no fruit, no sign of vitality to their vast expanse. In fact, many of the branches were broken, while many more seemed frail and diseased.

It was as if the Axis Tree… was truly and utterly dead.

Sunny looked around cautiously.

"What do you think this place does?"

There were five special squares on the game board — the Castles, the Shrines, and the Axis Tree. Sunny had mostly figured out the purpose of the first four, but he still had no idea what the function of the central square was.

Kai was looking around, as well.

"I don't see any structures. And I don't feel anything special, either."

Sunny contemplated for a while.

There had to be some use for the central square, apart from how important it was for traversing the board. The player occupying the middle would definitely have an advantage, but that advantage alone was not enough to make the square special.

Granted, there had only been four runes carved on the sides of the jade board — ash, snow, fear, and truth. There was no tree rune anywhere he had seen.

Still…

"Let's explore a little."

Kai hesitated for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Actually... before that..."

He pointed to the streams of clear water falling from high above.

"Wouldn't it be a shame to just waste all this water?"

Sunny stared at him in confusion, then scoffed.

"Sure, go ahead."

Soon enough, refreshed and clean for the first time in a long while, the two of them ventured to explore the labyrinth of branches. Kai was in a noticeably greater mood, even humming a jovial tune

quietly, while Sunny found himself feeling like a person once more.

It was a nice feeling.

They wandered the Axis Tree for a while, jumping to lower branches or flying up to those that were higher. However, there was nothing special on any of them, and as Sunny and Kai drew closer to the trunk, it seemed less and less probable that they would find something special.

In the end, they ascended to the top of the tree and looked north, witnessing the next mountain over. Sunny had hoped that they would be able to see further than usual, considering the height of the tree, but he was left disappointed. Everything beyond the neighboring mountains was hidden by a haze, and even Kai could not see through it.

The three mountains in the north, however… looked a little strange. Sunny was not sure what exactly was strange about them, but they definitely looked subtly different from all the snowy peaks they had witnessed in the south.

He sighed.

"No luck here, I guess."

He remained silent for a bit, then looked at Kai.

"...Maybe we should check the spot where the Tree Devil was staying."

Kai was the only one who had seen the Cursed Devil resting on a branch of the Axis Tree, so only he knew where that place was located.

He led the way. They descended along the immense width of the tree's trunk, eventually reaching one of the lower branches — the rest of them, if there were any, disappeared into the mist of the sea of clouds.

This particular branch was incredibly wide, especially at its base, where it connected to the trunk. That was where the Tree Devil had

been sitting on the day they first saw it, surrounded by snow.

There was no snow covering the tree now, so Sunny and Kai immediately saw the anomaly. Here, not far away from the Cursed Devil's resting place… the surface of the Axis Tree's trunk was viciously broken, a dark portal opening into its eerie depths. Nothing but mist dwelled beyond the portal, and out of it, a river of something seemed to have flowed once, solidifying into an amber mass.

From a distance, it seemed as if a river of molten gold had escaped the gargantuan trunk, most of it spilling into the clouds, while a little bit remained on the branch in small frozen puddles.

Sunny approached the nearest chunk of amber substance and touched it tentatively. It was smooth, hard, and cool to the touch.

Kai asked from behind him:

"What is it?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment. Eventually, he answered in an incredulous tone:

"It's… it's literally amber. It's tree sap."

Standing up, he looked at the breach in the trunk of the Axis Tree and frowned.

Eventually, Sunny looked at Kai.

"I… I think it's dead."

The breach was a wound dealt to the great tree a long time ago, and the pieces of golden amber were its blood.

He took a deep breath.

"Rather, I think it was killed."

The breach in the trunk of the tree was enormous, but it was insignificant compared to its titanic size. Such a small wound would

not have killed the Axis Tree… unless it was simply an opening someone used to suck its amber ichor dry.

Perhaps the Tree Devil had not spent these thousands of years simply waiting for an enemy to show up. Maybe it had drained the young sapling of the World Tree of its boundless lifeforce and vitality, devouring it hungrily to nurture his own corrupted soul.

If so…

Then maybe whatever it was that the Axis Tree was supposed to grant the Domain controlling it was long gone, that function of the Game destroyed when the great tree died.

Ariel's Game… was broken.

Sunny looked at the pieces of golden amber with a distant expression.

It was a little bit sad, and a little bit encouraging, to know that even things created by the great and terrible Ariel, the Demon of Dread, were not eternal.

The Nightmare Spell had been created by a daemon as well, after all.

So, maybe one day they would be able to kill it, too…

A pale smile touched his lips.

When Nephis first proclaimed her intention to destroy the Spell, it sounded like pure delusion.

But it did not seem that way anymore.

Looking at the fatal wound dealt to the Axis Tree, Sunny suddenly felt for the first time that their goal was within reach.

Chapter-2391: Night Silk

Sunny was getting used to the feeling of being pursued. He and Kai had spent a peaceful night in the dead branches of the Axis Tree, and in the morning, the Tree Devil and the Cursed Dragon conquered the mountains to the south and west of it.

He watched the western volcano be extinguished and shrouded in snow, familiar with the sight. For a few moments, Sunny allowed himself to contemplate turning back and attempting to take out one of the Devils come evening. It was an alluring idea, no doubt… facing each of the two fiends in sequence, slaying them, and arriving at the Snow Castle after having completely cleared the board.

But no matter how much he wanted to kill the Snow Devils and add them to his Shadow Legion, Sunny knew that it was a bad idea. He had not even recovered from his wounds yet, and both Slayer and his most powerful shades were still unavailable. More importantly than that, facing these powerful creatures was at best a gamble.

He might have allowed himself to become a little arrogant after attaining Supremacy, but the eerie events in the recent past helped him regain his senses. In truth, he had no business confronting a Cursed Tyrant in his current weakened state… even if he could wield his full power, a battle like that would have been a deadly challenge.

Sunny was ready to die — losing one incarnation would be painful, but not disastrous. However, if his avatar died here, Kai would die too. And that was not something he was willing to consider.

So, he had to win.

The battle against the Snow Tyrant was unavoidable, but fighting these two Devils was unnecessary. Sunny was not going to gamble three times in a row if he could do it just once.

With a sigh, he turned away from the distant mountain and looked at his right hand.

A few moments passed, and then, his fingers twitched slightly.

A subtle smile appeared on his lips.

'It's healing well…'

There was another piece of good news, as well. His soul had been healed completely — it happened in an instant, actually, not too long ago.

This incarnation of his was isolated in Ariel's Game, but it still shared the soul with all the rest. That meant that they had suffered the agony of having their soul wounded at the same time as he had. But… that also meant that Nephis could heal his soul by touching any of the avatars.

That was what must have happened.

'The others must be really confused right about now.'

Sunny chuckled.

'My, oh my. I'll have new stories to tell when I come out…'

Shaking his head, he concentrated on weaving. The pieces of golden amber lay near his feet, glistening in the morning light.

In the evening, Sunny and Kai left the Axis Tree and crossed the obsidian bridge, moving north. The mountain did not offer them any resistance, its peak exploding in a fiery conflagration of smoke, ash, and lava. Sunny could almost move his fingers freely by then, which helped him weave at greater speed.

They ascended to the smoking caldera and climbed its edge on the other side, looking north — at the last mountain they would have to conquer before coming into sight of the Snow Castle.

…And froze.

"What… what the hell is that?"

Sunny could not help but say the words despite promising himself to hold back on using them for a while.

But he had a good reason to.

The landscape in front of them… was not at all what they had expected to see. In fact, it was something that no one could have expected to see, because Sunny had never even imagined something like that existing.

The vast expanse of the chasm between the two mountains... was entirely obscured by a vast, tattered shroud. The three peaks in the distance were overgrown by that dark mass, as well, appearing like towering pillars enveloped in black spider webs. Enormous sheets of ghostly, tattered cloth billowed in the wind, stretching for many kilometers in all directions, their surface frayed and uneven, comprised of countless strands.

These eerie, tenebrous strands reached the northern slope of the mountain Sunny and Kai were standing on, as well, disappearing into the snow. As Sunny looked closer, he saw that the dark mass consisted of countless threads of flawlessly black silk, each of them as fine as a hair.

The entire northern side of the miniature realm created by Ariel was shrouded by this black web, as if a harrowing spider had made its nest somewhere beyond the horizon.

The silk strands were so numerous, in fact, that one could walk from where Sunny stood to the Snow Castle without needing the obsidian bridges or ever touching the clouds.

He shivered.

"Ah…"

Just what kind of horror had Weaver put on the board?

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said in a subdued tone:

"You know, Kai… Weaver's symbol was a spider."

Kai did not seem happy to hear that.

Sunny shook his head slowly.

"But actually, it was not Weaver who chose the spider as their symbol. Rather, people started to associate spiders with the Demon of Fate… after all, spiders are masters of weaving, as well."

He smiled darkly, remembering the spider silk he had found in the nest resting on the branches of the Soul Devouring Tree.

"Maybe even spiders themselves came to see their tribe as servants of Weaver. But... come to think of it... even the name Weaver is simply a description of what that daemon was. The Demon of Fate never shared what they knew, so they would naturally never reveal their true name either. I'd imagine someone simply started calling them Weaver, and that was what they went on using to introduce themself."

Nether and Hope were also like that. Their names were simply descriptions of what they were… the Demon of Desire gave living beings hope, while the Demon of Destiny ruled the Underworld. The titles given to them by people had slowly become known as their names, but they were merely descriptors.

So, in truth… despite inheriting the cursed lineage of the Demon of Fate, Sunny did not really know anything about Weaver at all. Even their name was a deception.

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"Why... exactly... are you telling me this?"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Well, it's just… I am trying to convince myself that the Snow Tyrant is not necessarily a spider. You know?"

Kai let out a deep sigh.

"Do you hate spiders, as well?"

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Not really. But I am considering starting to hate them right now…"

Chapter-2392: Snow Castle

When the morning came, the sight of endless webs enveloping the entire world became even more eerie.

The billowing, frayed tapestries of ghostly black silk covered everything in sight, disappearing behind the horizon. The mountains were buried under them entirely, like gravestones overgrown by mold...

Come to think of it, the mountain they had left yesterday must have been infected by the black silk as well — that was why it had seemed strange to Sunny from the Axis Tree. The webs had just burned away when the mountain erupted — but here, there was too much mystical silk for it to be consumed by ash and lava.

Sunny observed the nightmarish landscape silently, slowly clenching and unclenching his right fist.

'I don't like it at all.'

There were less than two days left before the battle against the Snow Tyrant, which meant that he had to start preparing himself mentally… for whatever it was he would face.

Before that, however, he had to finish the Memory he was creating from the golden amber of the Axis Tree and the three Sacred soul shards in his possession.

This time, he wanted to create a charm.

The design of the enchantment had already come together in his mind, and he already created enough strings of shadow essence to weave it. Now, Sunny was simply going over the mental image of the sorcerous tapestry while patiently carving the piece of amber into shape with a knife made of shadows.

The golden amber was impossibly tough, but it slowly gave in under the sharp blade. The shape Sunny was carving was both beautiful and simple — it was a star.

That star was going to help him kill the Snow Tyrant, whatever the Snow Tyrant was.

After that… he was going to give it to Saint. She had gone without a powerful charm to fit her Underworld Armament for too long, so he really had to make sure that the Evening Star looked worthy of its future owner.

'I'll be able to build on the initial enchantment later, as well. These Sacred soul shards are truly remarkable… the weight of the spellweave they can support is simply insane. This enchantment I envisioned is already more intricate and sophisticated than most of what I have done in the past, and it is nowhere near exhausting their potential.'

Sunny was pressed for time, so he had to be truly ingenious with the design of the enchantment. The solutions he had come up with to simplify the elaborate patterns, and therefore hasten the process of weaving, were nothing short of inspired.

He had even given the Evening Star a conditional limitation to greatly empower its effect when the proper conditions were met… that was actually an idea he stole from the Sin of Solace, that damn cursed sword. The Crown of Twilight relied on something similar as well, only replenishing his essence in the twilight of dusk and dawn…

Come to think of it, many if not most of his most powerful Memories had been limited in some way or another. That was what gave them true power. Sunny had always subconsciously understood that principle, but he only fully realized how to make use of it now.

There was probably some deep lesson about people and their Flaws somewhere in there, but he was too engrossed in his task to go on a philosophical tangent.

'Two days, one night.'

That was all the time he had left before facing the Snow Tyrant.

The first day passed in the blink of an eye, and soon, it was dusk once more.

The obsidian bridge…

Failed to come into existence.

The plumes of ash stretched toward the distant mountain and started to solidify, but got tangled in the billowing webs and crumbled without ever taking shape. Sunny and Kai observed the eerily beautiful scene in stunned silence, then glanced at each other warily.

There was no bridge, but the Ash Domain could still move. So, Sunny manifested a pair of black wings, and the two of them flew across the sea of fluttering black silk, landing carefully atop the northern mountain.

From there, they could finally see the Snow Castle.

And the source of black silk, the Snow Tyrant itself, as well.

'W—what?'

The creature was so immense that even Sunny could see it with a naked eye.

He forgot to breathe, looking at the peak of the final mountain with a pale face.

Out there, in the distance…

A gargantuan black moth was perched atop the silken peak, its tenebrous wings covering the slope. Its legs were like obsidian pillars, and its antennae extended far into the sky, swaying lightly in the wind.

The black moth was distantly similar to the Nightmare Butterflies of Ariel's Tomb, but also much more gigantic and harrowing than them. It was not even its outer appearance that was so terrible… instead, simply looking at it filled Sunny with a chilling, eerie feeling of

hopelessness.

Something about the titanic moth was so malevolent, terrifying, and deeply wrong that he felt the desire to give up and cease his senseless resistance. He was already doomed, after all.

But that was not why Sunny was so stunned.

Rather, it was because the sinister black moth felt... strangely familiar.

Come to think of it…

The black silk felt familiar as well.

Sunny shivered, and then whispered quietly:

"I… I know it."

Kai looked in surprise.

"What?"

Sunny raised his right hand and pointed at the terrible creature perching atop the Snow Castle.

"I know that creature… or at least its kind."

He had never met the Snow Tyrant, but he knew it well.

It was the Puppeteer.

It was a Puppeteer Worm, who had become the Puppeteer Moth after escaping from the chrysalis of human minds it had twisted, used as nourishment, and then destroyed.

Sunny remembered the description of the Puppeteer's Shroud...

[A worm of doubt once found its way into a righteous king's heart. With time, the king was devoured from the inside and became its puppet. A lifetime later, the Puppeteer Worm escaped from the king's dead body, leaving behind a cocoon of black silk. No one knows where it went; however, once people dared to approach the silent

castle, they found the silk among the mountains of gnawed bones and fashioned it into an armor.]

…He did not know whether the creature he was facing was the same Puppeteer Worm who had been responsible for the birth of the Mountain King, or simply the most accomplished member of their dreadful kind.

All he knew was that the description of his old armor failed to mention what a larva evolved to after leaving its chrysalis.

He was looking at what it had become right now.

Chapter-2393: Who Puppeteers the Puppeteers?

As darkness shrouded the world, Sunny and Kai sought shelter from the eerie gaze of the Puppeteer on the other side of the mountain. Sunny sat in the ash, his six hands dancing in the air as he wove the complicated enchantment of the Evening Star... one of them was giving him trouble, but he worked through the stiffness and the pangs of pain.

His expression was both focused and distant, as if he was in a state of flow, but also rattled to the core.

As the beautiful patterns of the sorcerous tapestry took shape, he could feel his shades being mended. The Obsidian Wasps were restored first, then the Shadow Wolves and Abundance… the Wolf was going to recover soon, too. Slayer was close to being fully healed as well.

The shade of the Rat King, meanwhile, had never been vanquished, so Sunny could summon it at any moment as long as he wished to.

'The Puppeteer Moth… really, now?'

Sunny was a little shaken.

Locking these feelings in an isolated partition of his mind, he allowed that part of him to take control of his mouth and spoke quietly:

"What a splendid coincidence."

Meeting an abomination that was connected to his First Nightmare here was truly unexpected. Unbelievable, even. What were the chances?

It was almost as if someone — a certain nebulous daemon, maybe — had pulled the strings behind the scenes to make it happen. Not the strands of black silk that the Puppeteer used, though, but an entirely different kind.

The Strings of Fate themselves, perhaps.

…Who was the real puppeteer here, then?

Suddenly, the giant black moth perching on the peak of a towering mountain did not seem so terrifying anymore.

It even seemed a little pitiful.

But, of course, that feeling only lasted for a moment.

Kai, who had been staring at the stars idly, turned to look at Sunny.

"But how do you know that horror?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, engrossed in weaving, then shrugged.

"It was mentioned in the description of a Memory I owned. It was the second Memory I had ever received, actually…. and its description was quite memorable. Because of how creepy it was. Who knew I'd meet that creepy abomination myself, one day?"

He sighed, then shook his head slowly.

"But, actually, it is a good thing. It is a wonderful thing, even."

Sunny glanced at Kai and tried to smile.

"Knowledge is the origin of power, after all. Few things are more important than knowing your enemy. I thought we would have to go into battle against the Snow Tyrant blind, but would you look at that? Now, we don't have to. We know quite a lot about it. In fact, we know the things that matter most."

He looked away and contemplated the situation for a while.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"The Puppeteers Moth… can also be called Doubt, I guess. That is the essence of its power. It infects the hearts of living beings with doubt and turns them into puppets — in other words, it is an immensely potent manipulator. I hesitate to say that the Puppeteer specializes in mind attacks, because at its level of power, these distinctions are somewhat meaningless… but fundamentally, that is what it does."

He took a deep breath, then smiled.

"Which means that we are actually in a highly advantageous position. These types of Nightmare Creatures usually rely heavily on their insidious powers and, most of all, on their thralls — but they themselves are relatively weak and frail when it comes to physical confrontations. And what did we do here in Ariel's Game?"

Kai studied him for a few moments.

"We killed most of this creature's thralls and put ourselves in a position to attack it when it's alone."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. That is what we did. So, in a way, we are incredibly lucky. Of all the Cursed Tyrants in the world, this one might just be the easiest to kill — considering the circumstances, that is. Not that killing it will actually be easy, of course. A Cursed Tyrant is still a Cursed Tyrant."

He exhaled slowly.

"We got rid of most of its thralls and outran those who remain, true. The Puppeteer is huge and grotesque, but it won't be that fearsome in a battle — relatively speaking, I mean. I'd say… between that thing and the Wolf, the Wolf would be more ferocious."

There was a long stretch of silence, and then Sunny added in a somber tone:

"But that does not mean that facing the Puppeteer won't be infinitely more perilous than facing the Wolf was. That is, of course, because

while we did kill most of its puppets, the real difficulty will be not becoming its puppets ourselves."

Sunny could not help but shiver.

"I would imagine… that a Cursed Tyrant can subjugate someone like us in an instant, as long as we give it a chance. It will make us doubt ourselves first, and then, before we know it, there will be invisible strings wrapped around our hearts."

Doubt… that was the weapon the Puppeteer would use against them.

Doubt was truly an insidious concept because no human was really immune to it. Even Supremes like Sunny were susceptible to doubt, as for Saints like Kai…

Sunny looked at his friend and shook his head.

"Actually, I am not really worried about you."

Kai raised an eyebrow.

"You're not? But… I am quite an insecure person. I doubt myself all the time."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"That is exactly what makes you terrible prey for the Puppeteer. You do indeed seem to suffer from self-doubt a lot… and yet, you have never allowed it to control you. On the contrary, you have overcome yourself at every step of the way — it is like you've been training for this exact moment all your life, really."

Kai, despite his lack of confidence, was a faultlessly dependable person. He never failed to rise to the occasion — even if he struggled to get there more than the rest of them did.

Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"In truth… I am much more worried about myself."

Chapter-2394: Confluence of Contradictions

Kai smiled at first, as if assuming that Sunny was joking, then looked at him with surprise after realizing that he was telling the truth.

"You are worried about yourself more than you are about me?"

Sunny simply nodded.

"Yes. I am… especially vulnerable to what that thing has in store for us."

Kai remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head.

"I find it hard to believe. You are a Supreme, after all. Didn't you tell me yourself that a Sovereign is someone who dares to bend the world to their will? How can someone be that obstinate and doubt themselves at the same time?"

Sunny looked at him with a dark expression and shrugged.

"Well, what can I say? People are complicated creatures. They can be two different things at the same time. So, I can be sure of myself so much as to force the world to agree with how I feel, but also doubt every single thing I do."

He was indeed someone who possessed a Will sharp enough to cut the world. But, at the same time, Sunny's existence was… deeply ambivalent.

He loved Nephis and enjoyed her affection, as well. But, at the same time, he always doubted her feelings for him and questioned his place in her life. The person she knew was only a husk of the real Sunny, after all.

So, he wanted to reclaim his fate and make her — and everyone else — remember him. But, at the same time, he wasn't really sure that he wanted it desperately enough to pay the price of becoming bound again.

He was determined to resist the horrors of the Nightmare Spell and protect humanity, but at the same time, he was hiding his existence from everyone, forced into the shadows by the cursed lineage of the Forgotten God.

Sunny was a confluence of irreconcilable contradictions on a good day, and a bad day… he was one push away from losing control and falling into a murderous frenzy.

All these conflicting emotions had been simmering quietly in the background as he lived his life. Usually, they were not a problem…

But tomorrow, each of the unresolved doubts he harbored would become ammunition the Puppeteer could use to destroy him. Each of them was a crack in his armor through which the enemy blade could slide.

So…

Tomorrow's battle was not going to be fun for Sunny.

He groaned.

'Ah. I really hate Nightmare Creatures who mess with my mind the most…'

Shaking his head, Sunny resumed weaving the enchantment of the Evening Star and grumbled:

"Well… you don't have to worry about me, really. I'll handle it. If everything else fails, pure spite has never let me down."

His expression turned somber.

"That said, I expect the battle against the Puppeteers to be terrible enough to push me to the limit. Far beyond my limit, really. I might be forced to resort to doing something really desperate… if I do, your

role will be the most important. You will have to help me come back."

Kai frowned.

"Come back? What do you mean?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"It's simple, really. You'll have to make me remember myself. By reminding me who I am."

Kai stared at him for a while, then cleared his throat.

"But, Sunny… I am sorry to say this, but despite our wonderful rapport in these last couple of weeks… I don't really know who you are. We are barely acquainted."

Sunny let out a laugh.

"Fair enough."

Then, he scowled.

"No, wait. What do you mean, barely acquainted? You and I are best friends! We fought side by side and killed literal gods together. We rolled in the same mud and ate the same rats. Are there even a closer pair in the world than us?"

Kai coughed.

"I didn't eat the rats, though..."

'Oh, right. He refused to partake in the rat barbeque, the fool.'

Sunny sighed.

Of course, Kai was right.

How could Kai make Sunny remember himself if he himself could not even remember the real Sunny?

It sounded like a problem, but actually, the answer was quite

obvious. In fact, Sunny had experienced a very similar situation once, only his role now was the opposite of what it had been back then.

A long time ago, Nephis had taught him how to make her escape the mind hex of the Soul Devourer, at least to a degree. All he had to do was recite three names to her — the names of the people she hated, and would therefore remind her of the most important thing in her life. Her ardent desire to destroy the Spell.

Aster, Song, Vale.

Sunny had to come up with an "Aster, Song, Vale" of his own.

He hesitated for a while, then said:

"Just recite a few names to me... Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, Rain, Jet. If that doesn't help, throw in Noctis and Ananke. Aiko, Julius, Beth… Kim, Luster, Quentin, Dorn, Belle, Samara, Obel. Hmm. That should do it, I think."

These were the strongest connections to his sense of self he possessed in the absence of a True Name. The tethers that bound Sunny to the world, and therefore shaped him.

If anything could remind him of who he was, and what was most important to him, it was these names. In a strange way… these few words were the most meaningful summation of his life.

Kai gave him a strange look, then nodded slowly.

"Alright. I'll remember."

He lingered for a while before adding:

"I must admit that I feel a bit weird about my name being there, though."

Sunny grinned.

"What can I say? You make an impression."

With that, he beckoned Kai to come closer.

"Oh, by the way… I am going to punch you really hard now."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

"Huh? What? Why?"

Sunny shrugged nonchalantly.

"You see the horizon? The sun is going to rise soon. I doubt that the Puppeteer will leave the Snow Castle, but it can surely subject us to some kind of harrowing mind attack without moving. You don't want to endure a mental attack of a Cursed Tyrant more times than necessary, do you?"

Kai moved back a little, a wary expression on his face.

"I don't, but what does it have to do with me getting punched?!"

Sunny scoffed.

"I mean, the best way to avoid a mental attack is to be unconscious. That's just common sense. So, come closer… it will only hurt a little…"

Kai, however, did not come closer.

A few moments later, a cloud of ash rose above the slope of the towering volcano.

Chapter-2395: Check

In the end, Sunny did not punch Kai into unconsciousness. The charming archer did, however, put himself into a state of deep slumber by commanding himself to sleep without seeing any dreams — Sunny remained nearby, standing guard above his sleeping figure while focusing completely on weaving.

When the sun rose and an ethereal bridge of glistening glass formed between the Snow Castle and the fuming volcano, a dreadful mental attack did, indeed, descend upon him like divine punishment.

Sunny winced as his hands faltered, a sudden discord introduced into the vast tapestry of essence strings he was weaving.

'Is it playing with me?'

Shaking his head, he corrected the flawed pattern and continued with his work.

The Puppeteer seemed to be probing his mental defenses. Even then, that single harrowing attack easily pierced his resistances and the invisible armor of Will he had forged around himself, forcing its way into his mind. Sunny felt himself reeling, an insidious presence taking root in his head.

His sense of reality started to fall apart.

Grumbling under his breath, Sunny partitioned the compromised part of his mind and isolated it from the rest of him. It helped to cope with the insidious, irresistible mental invasion of the Puppeteer… but only for a short while.

Soon enough, the tendrils of mind-altering corruption spread beyond the walls Sunny had erected, infecting more of him. Luckily, it was not the capital letter Corruption, but simply the mental plague

summoned into existence by a Cursed Tyrant instead…

'Luckily? Does that word really apply here?'

Sunny smiled darkly.

'Just a fallen god taking over my mind. No big deal...'

He isolated the newly compromised parts of his mind too.

'Let's see who'll last longer, bastard.'

Sunny had developed quite a stunning ability to split his mind into countless streams over the years, after all. From perceiving the world through his shadows, to controlling seven incarnations, to commanding the vast Shadow Legion and watching over the members of the Shadow Clan… he was quite adept at compartmentalization by now.

As the sun was rising from beyond the horizon, he and the Puppeteer played an eerie game. The giant black moth slowly conquered more and more of Sunny's mind, while Sunny calmly quarantined the contaminated parts and went on weaving.

It grew more and more difficult as time went on, however.

His hands slowed down, and the vision of the vast pattern of essence strings he held in his mind turned blurry. By the end of it all, Sunny halted completely, staring into the distance with an absent expression.

He was uncomfortably close to starting to drool.

Then, the sun separated from the sea of molten gold it had turned the clouds into and hovered above the horizon, slowly climbing up. The ethereal glass bridge evaporated, and at the same time, the foreign presence that had been slowly consuming his mind retreated in an instant.

Sunny let out a shaky breath and reassembled his mind into a single whole, swaying lightly as he did.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then resumed weaving with a somber expression.

His lips were pursed, and his voice was subdued:

"Ah… that was quite unpleasant."

And it had been merely a probing attack, at that. Experiencing the full brunt of the Puppeteer's might would be a far more appalling experience.

Sunny grimaced.

Throughout the day, as the weave of the Evening Star came together, the things he had been waiting for happened one after another.

Kai woke up from his deep slumber. The Wolf and its pack were fully mended. Slayer recovered from her wounds almost at the very last moment and rose from his shadow, just as full of malice and malevolence as she had been before.

The murderous Shadow had been absent for a few days, so he had to fulfill the conditions of their deal and make a blood sacrifice to her once more. Slayer drank deeply of his blood, and once again, her obsidian eyes seemed to ignite with a hint of remembrance for a few fleeting moments.

But then, they slowly reverted to being cold and unfeeling, devoid of their splendid luster.

This time, for the first time, Sunny felt disturbed by the subtle change that had briefly happened to his Shadow.

He could not help but ask himself once again…

'Did she? Did she really kill Weaver?'

The graceful Shadow stood motionlessly by his side, her hollow eyes betraying no emotion.

In the end, Sunny had no choice but to look away and concentrate on finishing the last patterns of the vast spellweave he was creating.

It was coming together well.

The Evening Star was the first Sacred Memory he would create. And although it was not entirely finished, still, he could already tell how different it was from all the other Memories he had created.

That was because of its very nature.

A Sacred Memory was an immensely powerful thing — powerful enough to interfere with causality and bend the laws of existence, even, just like deities could. However, it was just that, a thing. It possessed neither will nor intent, and therefore, it lacked the authority to achieve what it was designed to do.

How could it function, then?

The same way the lesser Memories functioned, of course — since Memories did not have souls, they were empowered by the soul essence of their master. Similarly, a Sacred Memory had to be empowered by the soul essence, the spirit essence, and, most importantly, the Will of its master to realize its potential.

Not just anyone would be able to use the Evening Star to its full extent.

Sunny sighed.

'I still have ways to go…'

Weaver's Mask and the Shadow Lantern did not have the same problem, after all. They were Divine Memories that even a mere Awakened could use, which meant that whoever had created them was infinitely more proficient at weaving than Sunny was.

Well, of course, they were.

After all, Weaver's Mask had been created by none other than the Demon of Fate, while the Shadow Lantern was a replica of Shadow God's relic created by the Nightmare Spell.

'I'll get there, someday. Maybe...'

The sun was already rolling toward the horizon by the time Sunny completed his sorcery. The beautiful star carved out of golden amber lay on his palm, its intricately engraved surface glistening in the eventide glow.

He sighed, then manifested the Jade Mantle and brought the Evening Star to the center of his polished black breastplate. The armor swallowed it, and as the Sacred charm drowned in the dark stonelike metal, disappearing without a trace, it was slotted into the Underworld Armament.

Pouring his essence and Will into Evening Star, Sunny felt a subtle power flow into his limbs.

'Works like a charm…'

He smiled darkly, deactivated the enchantment, and rose to his feet.

The sun would soon touch the sea of clouds.

The battle against the Puppeteer was about to commence.

Throwing a look at Kai, Sunny lingered for a few moments and asked:

"How about it? Are you ready to get the hell out of this dreadful place?"

Kai nodded calmly.

"Oh, I am. I've been dreaming of taking a proper shower for a week straight."

'Of course he has.'

Sunny sighed, then glanced at Slayer.

"What about you? Have something to say to me?"

Slayer did not deem it worthy to give him an answer. Instead, she simply checked if her swords slid out of their sheathes smoothly.

Sunny shook his head quietly and looked north.

The sea of clouds was drowning in darkness in the east while burning with a fiery crimson glow in the west.

The plumes of ash were stretching toward the Snow Castle like black tendrils.

Soon, they turned into an obsidian bridge, its surface glowing as if illuminated by countless embers.

Taking a step forward, Sunny called upon the shadows and ash. As he stepped onto the bridge, a tide of darkness followed him like a boundless mantle.

Chapter-2396: Evening Star

As Sunny walked across the bridge, bringing the Ash Domain with him, the gargantuan black moth perching on the peak of the distant white mountain shifted a little. Its size was so immense that, from a distance, it seemed as if the mountain itself moved.

Suddenly, he could sense something vast, ancient, and utterly alien gazing at him. It was as if everything about him was revealed under that terrifying gaze — the entity studied him with a dispassionate thoroughness, like one would study a strange and curious specimen after dissecting its body.

Then, the entity seemed to lose interest. The heavy gaze followed Sunny, but it felt far less penetrating than before.

He looked up at the titanic black moth's… face, if it could be called that. It was covered by what looked like soft black fur, with two enormous spherical eyes protruding from it on either side.

Its maw was hidden from sight, and its two enormous antennae swayed slightly in the wind. Apart from the fact that each was hundreds of meters in length, they looked like the long cushy eyebrows of a wizened sage.

The Puppeteer stayed motionless, and it was that lack of movement that made the sight of a titanic moth so eerie. Sunny would have been less tense if the Tyrant tried to threaten him or showed a hint of preparing for battle… but the creature stayed still, simply looking at him impassively.

'It's not taking me seriously at all.'

The sea of clouds below was glowing, painted in a million shades of maroon and crimson by the sunset. Sunny took a step and activated the enchantment of the Evening Star — the shadows surrounding him

seemed to grow darker, and the veil of ash more impenetrable.

He felt more powerful. He was more powerful, in fact, albeit not by much… for now.

The enchantment of the Evening Star was immensely potent, but simpler in execution than many he had woven before. That was because Sunny had chosen not to rely on the usual patterns he had memorized or developed while designing it. Instead of meticulously weaving the paths and mechanisms its enchantment was to follow, he wove the very concept of what it was meant to achieve into the pattern instead.

Sunny based the spellweave of the Evening Star on two simple concepts: abundance… and power.

The Evening Star was meant to grant its master an abundance of power. Not the physical strength, soul potency, mental fortitude, or even willpower, but simply power — in all its shapes and forms.

Sunny did not need to meticulously design how that effect would be achieved precisely because he had based the spellweave of the Evening Star on concepts as opposed to sorcerous principles.

After all, the Evening Star was a Sacred Memory. The ways in which it functioned were not as important as the very fact that it did. It did not work by adhering to cleverly designed patterns of cause and effect — instead, it worked because it bent the world into a state that supported its effect. The effect came first, while the cause followed.

That was how Sacred beings exerted their power, so Sunny had surmised that that was how a Sacred Memory should function, too.

The shift in the approach to designing a spellweave was so different from everything he had done before that it was hard to wrap his head around it. But once Sunny shifted his perspective and saw the foundations of sorcerous mechanics in a new light, the patterns he envisioned were actually simpler than what he had been creating before.

Of course, a sorcery like that could only be empowered by a master

whose Will could shoulder its burden. But as a Supreme Titan, Sunny was more than qualified to do just that.

Granted, creating a Memory that was simply supposed to make its master more powerful would not have been very useful. There were limits to his Will, after all, and even if there were none, a simple sorcery like that could not bend the laws of the world too much. The effect would have been negligible.

That was where the artificial limitation he had built into the spellweave of the Evening Star came into play. By limiting the Sacred Memory himself, he allowed it to bend the laws of existence much more than it would have been able to otherwise — as long as proper conditions were met. It was as if he was focusing its power into a narrow ray instead of unleashing it upon the world as a diffused wave.

The limit Sunny had placed on the enchantment of the Evening Star was as follows: its potency depended on how bright the world around it was. This Sacred Memory was almost entirely useless when surrounded by radiance and light… it grew exponentially more powerful the darker its surroundings were, though, and reached full potency in utter darkness.

And since Sunny could only attack the Snow Castle at sunset, the Evening Star would augment him more and more the closer nightfall came.

The augmentation of a Sacred Memory was already immensely powerful. However, there was also the [Underworld Armament] trait of the Jade Mantle to consider — the trait that enhanced the effects of any charm slotted into the tenebrous armor.

In short, the longer Sunny survived in the battle against the Puppeteer, the stronger he would become. Any augmentation was important, but this one, in particular, was especially vital due to the fact fighters usually grew exhausted and weakened by the end of a vicious battle — in that state of fatigue and vulnerability, every drop of power was especially precious.

So…

Hopefully, the Puppeteer was in for an unpleasant surprise.

Of course, Sunny was quite certain that the appalling creature had a few surprises in store for him, as well.

All his senses grew taut as he approached the end of the bridge.

All his muscles tensed in preparation for a ferocious, lethal battle.

Sunny inhaled deeply, then gritted his teeth and stepped onto the snowy slope of the towering mountain.

He had expected a devastating mental attack to slam into him immediately — maybe even some kind of profane assault that he could not even imagine, let alone describe.

He had prepared himself for anything… or so he had thought.

But he was wrong.

Because what happened next left Sunny completely stunned, and more than a little bit rattled.

Instead of a tyrannical assault, what met him on the slopes of the Snow Castle…

Was a voice.

The voice resounded from all around him, subtle and strangely soft.

It said:

"Welcome, liberator. Oh… I've been waiting for so long..."

Chapter-2397: To a Flame

Sunny froze.

He was not being subjected to a harrowing attack, and yet, that did not make him feel any less alarmed. If anything, he felt more shaken than he would have if the Puppeteer had thrown all its profane power into an obliterating assault.

Because despite the fact that the world had changed, and Sunny himself was vastly more powerful now than he had been before, one truth remained the same since the turbulent days of his youth.

It was that among all the horrors of the Nightmare Spell, none were more sinister and dreadful than the ones who could speak like humans.

'Damnation.'

He looked up and studied the motionless Puppeteer, who loomed far above him like a black insectile cliff.

'Don't answer, don't answer, don't…'

Then, his lips moved on their own:

"...Who's speaking?"

There were a few moments of silence, and then the soft voice resounded from nowhere — it was as if the wind itself was answering:

"I am Moth."

Sunny narrowed his eyes, unsure what to say.

The Cursed Tyrant… was talking to him.

The terrifying moth perching atop the mountain was engaging him in conversation, and on top of that, it was polite and soft-spoken.

'What the... hell...'

He exhaled slowly.

"Why are you talking to me, though?"

The Puppeteer remained silent for a moment, then answered with a question of its own.

"...Why not?"

Sunny could not help but let out a stifled chuckle.

'This is ridiculous…'

His Flaw still forced him to answer, though.

"Because you are a Nightmare Creature. An abomination. You and I are enemies, no?"

The gargantuan moth moved its antennae slightly.

"...Are we enemies? Why?"

Sunny laughed.

"Why? Oh, actually, you raise a good question. You, creatures of Corruption, are all completely overcome by a demented need to eradicate anything and everything that is good and pure. I have no idea why, so now that I have the chance, let me ask you instead. Why the hell are you, vile fiends, so hellbent on destroying us humans?"

The Puppeteer remained silent for a while, this time. Eventually, he seemed to sigh.

"Words have power, Liberator. The power of names is even greater still. And yet you use that power with such violence. You force them upon the world."

The giant moth tilted its head down, looking at Sunny with its

enormous black eyes.

"Corruption, abomination, fiend, vile. Pure, good. These words you use may not shape existence, but they shape you. They shape everything you touch, as well. They even shape me."

The winds howled, and the glistening strands of black silk enveloping the mountain fluttered in it like a tattered shroud.

The Cursed Tyrant spoke again:

"What you have named Corruption is the influence of the Void. It does not corrupt things — it simply changes them. These things it changes are not malevolent or vile, just like the things it spares are not pure and good. They are merely different. However…"

When the Puppeteer spoke again, its soft voice sounded a little mournful.

"There exists a contradiction between those of us who have been touched by the Void and those of us who have not, indeed. That contradiction gives birth to conflict. Those of my kind who are young and weak are not abominable… they are pitiful. They are neither of the Void nor of the Flame. They belong to both, but are welcomed by neither."

The gargantuan moth moved its wings slightly, causing hurricane wind to blow across the silken mountain. Sunny shielded his face from the dancing snow and grimaced.

'This thing is really huge...'

The Puppeteer continued:

"Their existence is a battlefield, and the war they wage against themselves drives them mad. In that anguished state, they are lost and blind. All they can do is desperately seek salvation, like moths to a flame. They are consumed by the desire to possess the flame… or to extinguish it. They are overcome by a misguided need to resolve the maddening contradiction and right everything that is wrong — with the world, and with themselves. Only then would they know solace."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Solace? The reason for all this misery is that they seek solace? How truly ironic. No wonder someone told me once that solace is a sin."

The Puppeteer stirred.

"It is in the depths of the Flame. Life is war; peace is death… these are the laws carved into existence by the Incarnations of Flame."

Sunny was getting a little confused. The way the Puppeteer spoke and the names it used were strange. The Flame… since the Puppeteer described the Flame as the opposite of the Void, it must have meant the vast universe created by the gods — the existence itself. Or did it mean the original Desire, from the flames of which the gods had been born?

Maybe it was both. There was probably no distinction between the two for a creature like the Puppeteer. The Incarnations of Flame it mentioned were the gods, then…

While Sunny considered the implication of these words, the soft voice spoke again, this time hiding a hint of enmity:

"What a hideous, cruel world they've created. Here, solace is indeed a sin… but more than that, it is a lie. There is no solace to be found — not for you, and not for me. Those poor wretches of my kind who are blinded by the Flame cannot see the truth, but I am different from them. I am not blind, and I am not drawn to the Flame. I have no desire to become ash."

Sunny frowned, staring at the giant black moth with a strange expression.

"So, what you mean to say… is that only the weaker Nightmare Creature can't overcome the irresistible urge to devour and destroy anything not touched by the Corruption. But you are so much stronger and above them all that you can keep that urge in check. In fact, you are not beholden to the Corruption at all."

The Puppeteer did not answer immediately. It remained silent for a while, and then asked suddenly, a hint of something strange and

eerie seeping into its seemingly soft voice:

"...You have never known anything but the Flame, Liberator, so you do not question its tenets. But let me answer the question you asked of me with a question of my own. Why do we have to be enemies? Is it because of me, a creature touched by the Void? Or is it because of you, a creature born of the Flame? Of the Flame..."

Where life was war.

Chapter-2398: Fuel of Desire

At first, Sunny laughed.

The question was really too preposterous. What was the Puppeteers insinuating? That the horrors of the modern era were caused by humans, and not by the plague and Nightmare Creatures lusting to destroy and devour the world?

"Oh… it is definitely because of you. Believe me, I am quite a peaceful person. You can even call me the Heir of Peace, if you wish."

Well…

Sunny did have an army of tens of thousands of dead souls dwelling in his own, all of whom — most of whom, at least — he had personally killed. But that was not because he was a bellicose and violent person. He had just been forced by the circumstances to go on a rampage or two.

And while few even among the Nightmare Creatures had caused as many violent deaths as Sunny had, that was not because he particularly enjoyed slaughter and carnage. Well, he did enjoy them sometimes… but not that often.

Very rarely, really.

Sunny opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it again.

He wanted to explain that humans would have left the Nightmare Creatures alone if the Nightmare Creatures did not represent an existential threat to humanity, if they had not attacked first… but that would have been a lie.

After all, humans had managed to eradicate most life on Earth — and had almost eradicated each other — long before the Nightmare Spell

descended. They were full of avarice, violence, and insatiable desire to have more, spread more, be more. They pillaged and plundered anything and everything that was of value relentlessly, repeatedly, and without remorse.

So, if there had really been a flock of harmless Nightmare Creatures grazing peacefully somewhere on a meadow, humans would have probably slaughtered them and dismantled their precious bodies for parts. The soul shards alone would have been a reason to drive them to extinction.

Sunny pursed his lips, suddenly unsure of himself.

Eventually, he simply repeated:

"Yeah… it is most likely because of you."

The Puppeteer seemed to look at him with pity.

After a few moments of silence, the soft voice spoke again:

"There is a far more meaningful question, Liberator. The Incarnations of Flame… why did they create their cruel world this way? Why must they make life a constant struggle, and deny solace to the beings trapped in the cage of their design? Why is there desperation, desire, hope, and war? Tell me, creature of the Flame."

Sunny suppressed the desire to scoff, surprised by the sudden philosophical question. Philosophical questions, by definition, had no answer — that was what made them such, to begin with. So, the better question would have been why the Puppeteer insisted on wasting his time…

But then, the derisive smile slowly drained from his face.

Because Sunny suddenly realized that he knew the answer.

He lingered for a few moments, and then whispered in a stunned voice:

"Because… the Flame… wanes."

The black silk fluttered in the wind, its countless strings rustling like a sea.

The soft voice of the Puppeteer was born from that rustle:

"Indeed. The Flame is Desire, and Desire is the Flame. But flame… needs fuel to burn, Liberator. It needs to be fed. It needs to devour something in order to sustain itself. Our longing, our yearning, our desire, our hope — they fan the Flame. You and I are different, but in the end, we are both the same. Our lives are fuel, and we only exist to be devoured by the Flame."

The giant black moth lowered its enormous head, staring at Sunny from above.

"We are both prisoners of this game, as well. We are different, yes… but we are the same. What we share is far more immense than what divides us. And so, there is no reason for us to be enemies."

Sunny shifted, engrossed by the truth… a version of truth, at least… offered him by the Puppeteer. His mind slowly drifted to its last claim, and after hesitating for a short while, he asked in an even tone:

"We are... both prisoners? Is that why you keep calling me the Liberator?"

The giant black moth's antennae swayed lightly.

"Yes. A long time ago, the one you call Weaver offered me a bargain. I would help them defeat the Demon of Dread in the Death Game, and in return, they would twist the Strings of Fate to ensure my survival. And if I waited long enough… a being would come to liberate me from my cage."

Sunny chuckled.

"Weaver promised you freedom, huh?"

The Puppeteer stirred.

"Freedom. Survival. Salvation."

The winds howled above the silken mountain, making the strands of black silk billow furiously… urgently.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"...Did you not know that Weaver was a consummate liar? No, really. You would have been hard-pressed to find a more treacherous bastard to make a deal with."

He shook his head.

"Let me tell you, Puppeteer. You should never trust the gods, but you should really never trust Weaver. Only a fool would. In fact, the only thing more foolish than that… would be to trust a Cursed Tyrant."

Looking up, he stared the gargantuan black moth in the eye.

"Let me ask you one question."

Sunny sighed and raised his hand, stretching slowly.

"Actually, I asked it already — as a matter of fact, it was more or less the first question I asked. Why are you talking to me?"

He lowered his hands and regarded the Puppeteer coldly.

"It wouldn't be to stall for time and make sure that I can't kill you before the sun sets, would it?"

There was silence for a few long moments.

And then, the soft voice resounded from nowhere once again…

Only it wasn't so soft anymore. And neither did it resemble anything that could be even distantly mistaken for a human voice.

Instead, an eerie, deeply disturbing, chilling rustle washed over Sunny, making his skin crawl.

"Aaah… kill… me?"

The world itself seemed to laugh at Sunny, full of disdain, sending his mind into a spin.

"Your death... is liberation. Ash Tyrant. Weaver... kept their promise."

The Puppeteer did not speak after that, but moments before they clashed, Sunny thought that he heard a dying echo drowning in the wind.

He could barely discern the words:

"Your flame… so sweet… it's calling…"

Chapter-2399: Bound

Sunny did not know whether the Puppeteer had told him the truth or woven intricate lies, shaping them to suit the mind of its prey. Perhaps it was both, with fragments of truth mixed in between deceit to make it all sound so much more believable and tantalizing.

One thing was certain, though… Sunny had not believed even for a heartbeat that the Puppeteer was above the malevolent madness all Nightmare Creatures seemed to suffer from.

Maybe abominations were indeed driven mad by the Call of the Flame, just like Awakened struggled to maintain their sanity when exposed to the Call of Nightmare.

Perhaps the enormous black moth was indeed adept at suppressing its malice, somewhat… but not because it was truly free from the frenzied compulsion to destroy and devour anyone and anything not twisted by the Void. Rather, it was merely to lure its victims into a false sense of security — just like the Puppeteer had attempted to lure Sunny.

It had always intended to consume Sunny — at best. At worst, its intention was to turn him into a puppet, infect him with Corruption, and make him its thrall.

If so, Sunny was not inclined to believe the rest of what the giant moth had told him either.

But still, still…

What if the rest of it was indeed true?

What if some of it was?

What if the world as Sunny knew it — the existence itself — was

nothing but a furnace where all of them were doomed to burn? If the purpose of all living things was merely to be fuel?

The universe was a cage built to contain the Void. But weren't all of them caged within it, as well?

It was such a chilling thought.

Sunny felt that there was something wrong with that line of thinking. Even if the Puppeteer had offered him some version of the truth, though, it had to have omitted something, changing the context and twisting the meaning of everything.

But Sunny...

Was not sure.

He could not be sure, because the seeds of doubt had already been planted into his mind.

'Damnation!'

Even after realizing what was happening, Sunny could not do anything.

All he could do was kill the Puppeteer before these seeds sprouted into something that could not be contained.

Luckily, the wasted time did not only benefit the eerie moth. With every minute that passed, Sunny was growing stronger — the Evening Star burned in the dark depths of the Underworld Armament, bestowing him with fierce power.

Of course, it was hungrily consuming his essence and willpower, as well. But that was a trade he was willing to make.

Sunny had been lulled by the conversation with the Puppeteer, but now, he shook that enthrallment off.

And when he did, he felt a chill run down his spine, realizing that passing time was not the only thing he had been overlooking.

In truth, Sunny had failed to notice quite a few things, as well.

Come to think of it, he had been behaving strangely from the moment his foot landed on the slope of the Snow Castle. Starting a conversation despite knowing better, humoring the Puppeteer's suspiciously convenient claims, failing to pay attention to anything about his surroundings — except for the billowing strands of black silk.

Most of all…

Forgetting that Kai and Slayer existed at all.

'W—what? How did I...'

Why had Sunny not even thought to question what his companions were doing while he conversed with the Cursed Tyrant?

'Curses!'

Sunny hastily looked around, casting his shadow sense out at the same time.

His eyes widened, and fear grasped his heart with icy claws.

Kai was hundreds of meters away… what looked like Kai, at least, in his Transcendent form. A giant figure was buried under a slithering mass of black silk, straining desperately to tear itself free. Sunny could hear the muffled cries of a dragon as the great beast tore at the silk, midnight scales glinting through the gaps between the dark strands.

Slayer was nowhere to be seen, as if swallowed by the billowing mass of black silk entirely.

The Puppeteer was still perched atop the mountain, motionless, looming above them like an eerie insectile deity.

Most disturbing of all…

Was the fact that, without Sunny ever realizing it, impossibly thin strings had wrapped themselves around his limbs, penetrating his

body, and reaching into his very soul.

Sunny shuddered.

'Oh…'

Throwing a murderous gaze up, at the still figure of the gargantuan black moth, Sunny lunged forward.

He tried, at least.

But the black strings held him in place, controlling him like a marionette.

"Aargh!"

A hint of panic flooded his mind like a chilling wave. Suppressing it fiercely, Sunny strained against the invisible strings, feeling them tremble and give. His Will cut at them like a blade, severing a few.

But more took their place, piercing Sunny's flesh, soul, and spirit.

These strings were both tangible and intangible. They restrained him physically, but much more perilously, they restrained him mentally as well.

His mind was infected by doubt, and the Puppeteer used that doubt to control him. When Sunny wanted to lunge forward, the strings strangled his determination to do just that — and so, he stayed in place, unable to force himself into commanding his body to move.

'You… vile… thing!'

Sunny growled and purged his mind, throwing it into the state of battle clarity. At the same time, he steeled his resolve and wrapped himself in an armor forged out of pure Will.

He rebuilt his consciousness around an indomitable axis…

His killing intent.

His cold, scathing, overwhelming desire to visit death and destruction

upon the Puppeteer. To rip that vile moth apart.

Countless strings of black silk snapped.

But… even more surrounded him, binding him like a suffocating cocoon.

Or a chrysalis, perhaps.

Sunny let out a stifled scream, falling to his knees.

The strings cut into his skin, drawing drops of crimson blood.

'Kill it... I must...'

Kill it.

Kill it.

He had to!

Kill!

Grinning wickedly, Sunny commanded his blood to flow back into the thin cuts left on his body and released his physical form. His body turned into a mass of formless darkness… but he failed to escape the stranglehold of the Puppeteer's strings, still, since they bound the shadows just as easily as they bound flesh.

The vast shadow struggled and strained, enveloped by the web of black silk…

Bound, trapped. Unable to escape.

Some distance away, no glimpses of the magnificent dragon could be seen through the billowing mass of glistening strands anymore, and no sound of him could be heard. Kai's figure was buried entirely under a dark hill of silk.

Most of the sun was hidden behind the horizon, and the fiery splendor of radiant sunset was slowly turning into the dim twilight of dusk.

Chapter-2400: Breaking the Rules

'Aaahh…'

Sunny could feel his mind slipping.

The Puppeteer loomed above the world like a dark cliff, the giant black orbs of its eerie black eyes staring down upon the slopes of the silken mountain dispassionately.

Kai was still struggling to free himself from under the mass of black silk, but he was almost entirely immobilized by now.

Sunny was straining against the Puppeteer's strings, as well.

But it was pointless.

If they were only holding him in place, he could have torn them apart. He could have slithered his way out of their inescapable embrace, at least. But the strings bound his mind just like they were binding his shadow — his very thoughts were restrained, and Sunny could not even fathom trying to break free anymore.

Time was running out.

The only thought the Puppeteer could not poison with doubt was the one Sunny kept repeating silently, using it as an axis that held his mind together and prevented it from falling entirely under the eerie abomination's control.

'Kill it, I must kill it!'

His bloodlust was his only salvation.

The vast shadows stirred. Sunny broke his mind apart into countless

streams, abandoning most of them to free some from the insidious grasp of the Puppeteer.

He had to do something drastic.

The time for desperate measures had come…

And gone.

Now was the time for pure madness.

Sunny imagined himself taking a deep breath.

Then, he took all his willpower, all his authority, all his killing intent, and all the power granted to him by the Evening Star.

And used them to call forth a shade.

If he thought about it… the Puppeteer was really in a bad situation.

Its true power lay in its thralls, but none of them were here to protect their master.

The black moth stayed still and motionless, and that was not because it had no need to move — rather, it was because the Snow Tyrant was not that fierce and physically strong. All it could do to deter the enemy was use its profane powers and strangle their will to reach it.

On top of that… Sunny was more or less its natural predator.

That was because Sunny commanded a legion of shades, and shades possessed neither will nor a sense of self. They had no desires, no resolve, no determination of their own…

And therefore, they knew no hesitation. They were immune to doubt, because doubt was foreign to their very nature. There was nothing for the Puppeteer to poison, so it was powerless to control the shades — it could only control their master. But as long as Sunny remained firm in his conviction, his shades would be able to do what he could not.

There was just one enormous, mountain-sized problem. The

Puppeteer might have been weak in direct confrontation, but that was only in relative terms. It was still a Cursed Tyrant, no matter where its true talent lay.

Not just any shade could face it in battle.

The Obsidian Wasps would be destroyed by one flap of the Puppeteer's wings. The Shadow Wolves would be vanquished and torn apart in an instant. Abundance would hold out longer, but it would not muster enough offensive power to kill the abominable moth before it was too late. The Rat King was vicious and destructive, but it needed time to propagate and grow unstoppable.

That only left the Wolf.

The ruthless, proud predator from the dawn of time… one fierce and deadly enough to rip the Puppeteer's wings off and crush its appalling head.

And yet…

Sunny was full of doubt.

Would the Wolf really be able to kill the Snow Tyrant?

Would Sunny himself remain firm enough not to command his terrifying shade into retreat?

'No…'

Doubt made Sunny weak and indecisive. It made him feel despair. He still was in control of enough of himself to summon a shade, but he was not confident that the same would hold true in a few minutes.

So…

He did what he always did when forced into a corner.

He cheated.

The shade Sunny called forth was not an Obsidian Wasp, Abundance, Rat King, or the Wolf.

Instead... it was the shadow of another Cursed Tyrant.

It was Condemnation.

Sunny had lost access to his shades after entering Ariel's Game, but they still existed somewhere out there, within his soul. Other shades might have been summoned and carrying his orders, but Condemnation wasn't. Because it had never answered his call before.

Augmented by the Evening Star, Sunny's tyrannical will and his undeniable authority descended upon the somber giant, commanding it to emerge from the peaceful darkness of his soul.

Sunny had thought that he would be able to overpower the obstinate Tyrant while augmented by the Sacred Memory…

But he was wrong.

His will and his authority crumbled against the unfathomable, inert depths of the enormous shade. Condemnation refused to move, just as it always had. It remained still and motionless, towering above the silent waters of his soul.

Sunny had expected as much.

After all, he had not been able to call upon any other shade earned beyond the confines of Ariel's Game, either. But while Sunny could not summon them with his [Shadow Legion] Aspect Ability, which the laws of this artificial realm were interfering with... that did not mean that he could not fool these laws.

So, instead of commanding the massive shade to reveal itself, he simply gathered all his willpower…

And banished Condemnation from his soul.

He threw Condemnation out.

Sunny had never done something like that before — which did not mean that he couldn't. Now that he was Supreme and wielded greater authority both over his soul and over the shades populating it, he could summon them forth and call them back. He could also store

physical items within his soul and expel them from it, effectively manifesting them.

And that was what he did with the vast, gargantuan shade of Condemnation — he expelled it.

Sunny had not attempted to do that with any of his shades in the past for a good reason, though.

Any shade he could not summon with his [Shadow Legion] Aspect Ability was a shade that did not obey his commands. That fact would not change even if he managed to summon it into existence, somehow… which meant that once the shadow of Condemnation emerged into the light, Sunny would have no control over it whatsoever.

It could attack the Puppeteer. It could just as well attack him, instead. It could even remain still and do nothing, content to simply be.

But that was a risk Sunny was willing to take, at the moment.

In fact, he welcomed it.

The potentially fatal drawback of summoning a disobedient shade was actually a life-saving grace in his current situation.

Because if Sunny could not control Condemnation… the Puppeteer could not control Sunny to order Condemnation to stand down.

And since he was not using [Shadow Legion] to summon it, the laws of Ariel's Game would, hopefully, fail to prevent the shadow colossus from appearing.

'Snow Tyrant, Ash Tyrant… let's add a third Tyrant into the mix, shall we? Let's break the rules!'

As countless strings of black silk fluttered in the wind, rushing to bind the vast shadow…

Reality seemed to ripple.

The sea of clouds swirled.

And then, the mass of silk strands was torn apart when a colossal hand emerged from Sunny's formless vastness, extending far into the sky and casting a titanic shadow onto the slope of the shuddering mountain.

Chapter-2401: Two Tyrants

A titanic arm woven out of darkness and obsidian rose from the formless shadow, spanning almost two kilometers in length. Then, it fell slowly, the vast palm striking the slope of the mountain with calamitous power.

Strands of black silk flew in the hurricane wind, and a whirlwind of snow escaped from beneath them into the frigid air.

The mountain groaned as the shade of Condemnation pressed down upon it, and a gargantuan head followed the titanic arm.

The shadow of the dead Tyrant slowly pulled itself out of the shadow and straightened, towering above the world. Its size was truly unimaginable — the tenebrous figure of Condemnation was as tall as most mountains on Earth, and even here in the artificial world of Ariel's Game, it seemed improbably immense.

Standing at the lowest point of the slope, near the rippling sea of clouds and the tapestries of black silk hiding it, the shadow of the Cursed Tyrant reached more than halfway to the highest point of the Snow Castle mountain — if Condemnation raised its hands, they would cast a shadow upon the jagged peak.

…And on the giant black moth perched on top of it.

The Puppeteer was looking down upon the towering figure of Condemnation, still eerily motionless. Compared to the gargantuan shade, it seemed almost petite. From the tip of its antennae to the edges of its folded wings, the giant black moth was no more than a kilometer across — barely a quarter of Condemnation's unfathomable height. Its actual body was even smaller.

Once the titanic shade straightened, the Cursed Tyrant finally reacted. It shifted, its wings trembling subtly. An eerie clicking

washed over the world, making the winds go mad with terror.

The Puppeteer stared down at the shadow of Condemnation…

And the shadow of Condemnation looked up, casting its lightless gaze at the Puppeteer.

'Go… rip each other apart!'

Sunny strained against the invisible strings, screaming silently as they cut his very being apart. No matter how fiercely he resisted and how badly he hurt himself by fighting against the Strings of Doubt, he could not free himself from their hold. On the contrary, with every passing moment, the insidious influence of the Puppeteer spread, binding him tighter.

And although he was desperately hoping that the shadow of Condemnation would clash with the eerie black moth, there was no guarantee that it would.

That shade was different from the rest, possessing a mind of its own. However, that mind was strange and alien, not easily understood — Sunny had no idea what guided it, and therefore, he did not know what Condemnation would do.

The tenebrous giant could indeed attack the Puppeteer. It could turn around and crush Sunny under its foot, as well. It could even do nothing…

But that did not matter too much, really, because no matter what it did, the Puppeteer would have to react. Even if Condemnation showed no immediate hostility to the insidious moth, the moth would not be able to ignore the threat it represented or tolerate its presence in the Snow Domain.

The Puppeteer would be forced to act, and therefore, the clash between it and the shadow of Condemnation was inevitable.

Sunny was going to use that chance to escape his bindings.

'Come on!'

To his relief, the shadow of Condemnation seemed to sense the silent malice of the giant moth perched atop the mountain. Still looking up, it slowly raised its titanic foot and took a step forward, breaching a vast distance with that single step.

It was climbing the mountain.

'Yes!'

Consumed by doubt and pain, Sunny felt a hint of vicious glee.

He did not hope that the titanic shade would be able to kill the Puppeteer. Even if the accursed moth was physically weak, it was still a Cursed One, while the shade of Condemnation was merely that — the shade of a once mighty being. Its calamitous power was incomparable to a true Cursed Tyrant, and the shadow of its Will was incomparable to the profane authority of a living deity.

Even if shades were immune to the Puppeteer's malevolent power, Sunny did not count Condemnation's chances high.

And yet, the devastation caused by a clash between these two would be unthinkable. The Puppeteer would most likely prevail… but it would not prevail easily, and neither would it prevail unscathed.

Most importantly, it would not prevail swiftly.

Which would give Sunny plenty of time to free himself while the enemy's attention was concentrated somewhere else.

Out there in front of him, Condemnation took another titanic step, making the mountain shake.

It was then that the Puppeteer finally moved.

Its great black wings unfolded, instantly obscuring the sky. The shadow they cast swallowed the world, and then, the Puppeteer leaped off its silken perch in one swift, quiet motion.

As it plummeted down, the winds groaned and screamed, cut by the sharp edges of the vast black wings. The profane deity of Doubt was like a guillotine blade made of pure darkness, severing the world as it

fell down upon the shadow of Condemnation.

The black silk billowed and danced as it passed.

At the last moment, the Puppeteer righted its flight and allowed the wind to support its wings, turning from the dark slope toward the towering colossus. The two of them collided with harrowing violence, making the sky split apart and causing the mountain to fracture. The giant moth's six legs pierced the chest and the neck of Condemnation, and it straddled the Sacred shade, facing it directly.

The tenebrous giant staggered from the impact.

It raised its hand, intending to tear the wings of the Puppeteer apart, but at that moment, the endless mass of black silk boiled and surged. Titanic tendrils of it shot upward and wrapped themselves around Condemnation's wrists, pulling its hands down. More still bound its legs and waist, weighing them down with inescapable power.

But that was not all.

At the same time, the endless expanse of black silk stretching between the Snow Castle and the surrounding mountains surged, too.

Countless strands of it originated from the silken mountain, reaching outward like a boundless web. Now, they rose into the air and surrounded the Snow Castle, closing around it like a colossal cocoon.

As they slowly closed, the world dimmed. The blazing, bleeding inferno of the dying sunset was blotted out, and a deep darkness fell upon the fractured mountain.

…In that darkness, the Evening Star burned, fueling Sunny with a flood of power.

Chapter-2402: Doubtless

The world quaked and shook as the Cursed Tyrant and the Sacred shade clashed. The immense vastness of Condemnation was straining against the colossal pillars of black silk that bound its limbs, while the Puppeteer straddled its chest, reaching for the giant's face.

It seemed to have the upper hand at the moment, but the shadow of Condemnation was already retaliating. Even if it could not break the countless strands of silk, it had already started… assimilating them.

Everything that touched Condemnation was condemned to become a part of it, and the black silk was no exception.

But was the Puppeteer an exception?

Sunny did not know, and he did not have time to observe the battle between the Tyrants — one living, one dead — closely.

Because his only chance to free himself from the invisible strings cast by the Puppeteer was now, while the accursed moth was distracted by the shadow of Condemnation.

Sadly…

Contrary to his hopes, the Puppeteer did not seem distracted at all. Even while fighting the titanic foe, it maintained flawless control of its strings — in fact, their silken vice had only grown more crushing, making Sunny reel and sway at the edge of the abyss.

He could feel the last shreds of certainty slipping away from him. He was not even entirely sure of who he was anymore.

Once he lost himself entirely, he would truly and utterly turn into an obedient puppet of the harrowing black moth.

'I… refuse!'

As the invisible strings sliced him apart, Sunny continued to fight them, to exterminate the doubt plaguing his mind, and to strive to break free.

All the things he had done to gain freedom, everything that he had sacrificed to break his chains… and what, he would become a damn insect's toy?

Sunny raged against his doubt, against the invisible strings, tearing more and more of himself apart to escape them.

But what was the point?

The strings were unbreakable.

It was all hopeless.

The suffering was overwhelming.

'Ah…'

He knew suffering well. From the cruel expanse of the Forgotten Shore… no, from even earlier than that. From the suffocating maze of the outskirts until now, every step he took was accompanied by unbearable pain.

That was life… that was the truth of his existence. Of all existence. An endless struggle to fuel the Flame, an endless struggle that was the Flame, a terrible furnace that endlessly devoured itself to continue devouring, struggling, and burning.

An endless, vile, self-sustaining curse.

So wasn't it… wasn't it enough?

Did he really have to suffer more? To struggle more?

Struggle…

Did he not deserve to stop struggling, for once?

Sunny shivered, enveloped by the invisible strings. The strings were wrapped tightly around him, their cold touch promising peace and solace.

'...No.'

It wasn't enough.

Solace was a sin. Peace was death.

Stop struggling?

'Like hell!'

Sunny would only stop struggling when he was dead.

And he was technically already dead — so...

He was never going to stop.

Never!

Life was a struggle? Living hurt?

'Good!'

Pain was a gift. As long as he could feel pain, he knew that he was still alive.

So what if the Flame needed fuel to burn? Sunny himself was a part of the Flame — all of existence was — so why would he want to starve and extinguish himself?

Why would he not want to burn as brightly as he could, to pursue his desires as passionately as he could, to feed the flame with his longing?

That... was life.

Why would he not want to live?

'Damn moth… get the hell out of my head, you lying wretch!'

The vast shadow surged, tearing the strings apart. Countless strands of silk broke…

But not enough of them to set him free.

However, by resisting as desperately as he could, Sunny did buy himself time.

And a few moments later…

A graceful figure suddenly appeared nearby, her long braid whipping in the wind. Slayer dodged the tendrils of silk, dashing between them like a dancer, and reached him in an instant.

Landing on the snow near Sunny, she looked at him briefly, her onyx eyes shining with sincere, murderous purity.

Then, her twin swords fell down, slicing through the invisible strings that bound him in place. Empowered by ash, her strike carried an undeniable finality — the sharp blades sliced through countless threads of silk, and suddenly, Sunny could move again.

As the two titanic creatures battled on the slope of the fracturing mountain, the shadows behind them seethed and surged.

"Free... Kai."

The hiss that resounded from the shadows did not sound like a human voice. It washed over the world, making Slayer take a step back.

She lingered for a moment, then dashed in the direction of a hill of black silk under which Kai was buried. Countless strings shot to bind her… but she dodged those of them that were tangible, while those of them that were so thin as to be invisible simply fell powerlessly after touching her ebony skin.

After all, Slayer had managed to survive thousands of years in the Shadow Realm. Other shadows had lost themselves to its dark expanse, but even in the embrace of death, she never did — even if her memories were gone, she always remained uncompromising, the pure nature of her unblemished spirit tolerating no doubt.

Sunny, meanwhile, rose and manifested into a towering colossus.

Well… it was a little presumptuous, to call himself a colossus when the shadow of Condemnation and Puppeteer were nearby. Compared to them, his Shadow Colossus form — even though it was taller than ever before — seemed certifiably puny.

But the power boiling inside him was anything but. Most of the sun was already hidden behind the horizon, and the mountain was enveloped in a gargantuan cocoon of black silk — surrounded by darkness, the Evening Star had almost reached its apogee.

…It was still not enough, though.

Slayer might have cut the strings binding Sunny, and he might have torn countless strings apart himself.

But more were already rushing at him, ready to pierce him and infect him with doubt.

No… to win this fight, he had to do more.

To be more.

Or be different, at least.

Sunny looked up, at the two battling deities.

And then, he did something he had been wary of… frightened of… for a long, long time.

Chapter-2403: Forced Enlightinment

On the slope above Sunny, Condemnation was absorbing the strands of silk into the vastness of its tenebrous body. The mighty black tendrils binding its limbs had already been assimilated, tearing as the towering giant broke free of their hold.

So were the lower segments of the Puppeteer's legs — four of its legs, at least, which had been thrust into Condemnation's chest. The giant moth let out a strange clicking sound as its limbs snapped, rivers of eerie black ichor flowing out of the terrible wounds like a tide. Everywhere the drops of dark liquid fell, the slope of the mountain itself seethed and boiled, giving birth to grotesque apparitions.

Losing its purchase on the body of Condemnation, the abominable moth should have plummeted down from a great height. However, instead, it was flattened against the towering shade's titanic chest, slowly drowning in it, as if attracted by the pull of an irresistible force.

For a moment, it seemed as if the Puppeteer was in a desperate situation.

But then, Sunny saw something that stunned and terrified him. Something that should not have been possible.

Condemnation's gargantuan head… separated from its body in a dreadful fountain of obsidian shrapnel.

The black moth had two legs left, after all — and using them, it had just finished brutally tearing the titanic shade's head off its neck.

The Puppeteer looked small and delicate in front of the mountain-sized shadow of Condemnation, and yet, it easily raised the enormous

head with its two thin legs.

Sunny was not sure if the giant black moth had a mouth…

But he was entirely certain that the head of Condemnation was being devoured, somehow.

It was swiftly reducing in size, torrents of darkness flowing down the towering shadow's beheaded body while pieces of obsidian rained down like dark meteors. Their impacts damaged the slope of the mountain even more, sending deep cracks running through it.

Condemnation, meanwhile, was about to grasp the Puppeteer's wings. However, those wings moved at the last moment, the sharp edges slicing through the titanic shade's wrists like colossal blades.

In an instant, the towering giant lost both of its hands.

Beheaded and mutilated, Condemnation swayed…

And moved its arms to embrace the Puppeteer, seemingly unconcerned about the dreadful state of its material vessel.

Pieces of the slope, glacial ice, and vast tapestries of black silk were already being absorbed into its body, turning into Condemnation's flesh.

The titanic shade was going to offer the Puppeteer a harrowing fight…

But Sunny knew that it was going to lose.

It could even be entirely destroyed — not sent back into his soul or the Shadow Realm itself, but simply annihilated, ceasing to exist forever… or perhaps becoming nourishment for the eerie black moth.

Sunny had not known that shades could even be destroyed. But he should have known better… there were few absolutes in the world of the Nightmare Spell. The fact that none of his shades had been destroyed before simply meant that he had not met a creature capable of destroying them yet.

As the Rank and Class of his enemies reached the peak of profane power, he was bound to meet one soon.

In fact, he already had — Sunny was pretty sure that Condemnation would have been able to assimilate shades back when it was reigning the Hollows of Godgrave, making them another part of its nebulous body.

So why would the Puppeteer be any different?

That was why Sunny could not rely on the rogue shade of Condemnation. If he wanted to defeat the abominable moth and win the Death Game, he could only rely on himself.

And for that…

He had to become someone who could kill the Puppeteer.

Sunny himself was incapable of that feat. He was a Supreme Titan, yes, albeit a severely weakened one… however, even if he had faced the corrupted Spirit of Doubt wielding all his dreadful power, the result still would have been the same.

All his power was useless if he could not bring himself to use it, plagued by doubt and controlled by the strings of black silk.

Sunny had no hope of overcoming the Puppeteer. So, what could he do?

He could become someone else.

He was a shadow, after all, and shadows were inherently formless. At the same time, they were adept at assuming any form they wished… or rather, the form of what was casting them.

Sunny had learned to do the same with the help of Shadow Dance.

And yet, he had been holding himself back from mastering the Fifth Step of Shadow Dance — the step that would allow him to shadow the Attributes and various traits of other beings — due to how dangerous it was.

He was afraid to lose himself in their forms forever.

…That fear was pointless at the moment, though, because becoming a marionette controlled by the Puppeteer was a far worse fate than becoming something he could not recognize.

So, Sunny forcefully suppressed his murderous rage and brought the bleeding fragments of his frayed mind together, preparing to break through to a new level of mastery over Shadow Dance.

He collected the insights and attainments he had glimpsed as a Saint and as a Sovereign, plunging himself into a state of artificial enlightenment.

The concepts and ideas he had brushed against, but chose to ignore, shone in the darkness of his mind and fused together.

The experiences he had tried to forget surfaced in his memory, becoming revelations.

Sunny felt a clear picture of what he had to do, and how to do it, assembling in his head — creating a path he had to follow in order to successfully perform the Fifth Step.

All that was left to do was try. Succeed.

And survive succeeding.

'I must remain myself.'

As the abominable moth and the headless giant tore each other apart in front of him, Sunny focused all his being on one impossible task…

Become a creature capable of slaying the Puppeteer.

…But what creature could that be?

Well.

Wasn't that obvious?

[Stalwart] Attribute Description: [The Stone Saint is highly resistant

to all forms of damage, as well as fully immune to mind and soul attacks.]

As the mystical stonelike metal of the Jade Mantle encased the Shadow Colossus in a fearsome black carapace, Sunny extended his senses to perceive every little detail of the armor forged by Nether, the Prince of the Underworld.

He had to become one of Nether's children.

He had to become a Stone Saint.

Chapter-2404: Fifth Step

When Sunny thought about it, a Stone Saint was one of the best possible forms he could attempt to assume to master the fifth step of Shadow Dance — even if he did not consider the nature of the battle against the Puppeteer.

After all, Saint was his first Shadow. She had spent close to a decade by his side, saving his life countless times — just as he had saved hers. Saint was not only his most loyal follower, but also his battle companion and, at many points, had been his teacher.

There were few beings in the world he knew better than he knew Saint. Not only that, but Sunny had also taken her into the embrace of shadow countless times, and as his power augmented her, he had fathomed the Stone Saints in great detail — body and mind.

Additionally, Sunny already shared a degree of kinship with these stonelike creatures. After all, he commanded the Jade Shell and the Jade Mantle — a piece of Nether's inheritance had already become a part of him.

So, if Sunny wanted to assume the form of another creature to the point of manifesting its Attributes, a Stone Saint was a good choice.

He had mastered the first step of Shadow Dance by shadowing Nephis, whose battle style he knew the best. And now, he was going to master the fifth by shadowing Saint, whom he was familiar with on a level that was only possible between the Sovereign of Death and one of his Shadows.

This… was going to be different from anything he had done before. Sunny had plenty of experience assuming forms different from his own, of course, but those were merely imitations. Even the Shadowspawn Form, which he had mastered more than any other, transformed only his appearance and the physical structure of his

body. The rest of him, things hidden from view, remained the same.

Today, though, Sunny had to delve much deeper into personifying someone other than himself.

Imitation was not going to cut it.

He had to become the genuine thing.

And so…

Sunny summoned the image of Saint into his mind, and allowed the Shadow Colossus Shell to crumble. At the same time, he released his own shadow to occupy the same space.

His vast shadow rose like a tidal wave and billowed, suspended on the cusp of manifesting into matter, but not quite tangible yet.

Sunny thrust himself into a foreign mindset, substituting the essence of his being with one that belonged to someone else.

He was not a creature of flesh and bone born in the outskirts of NQSC. He was not a shadow of that mortal man, either.

'I… was born in the Underworld.'

Deep in the cavernous halls of his dark domain, the last child of the Forgotten God had created Sunny from stone to quell the fire burning in his resentful heart. However, that fire only grew hotter.

Designed to bring peace, Sunny and his siblings were instead born into an endless war.

'I… was raised on the battlefield.'

He was proud. He was strong. He was a warrior.

He was proficient in all forms of combat, having wielded all manner of weapons to wage war upon the gods. On a thousand blood-soaked battlefields, countless weapons sang in his hand — and by listening to their cold songs, he had learned how to fashion himself into a weapon, too.

'I… know no surrender.'

There were beings out there who could destroy him — however, there were none who could bring him to his knees. His stonelike body was nearly indestructible. His spirit was indomitable. His conviction was as firm as a mountain, as clear as crystal. His fierce heart knew no submission, only loyalty.

"I…"

He was an orphan. His creator was long dead, and his siblings had all been either destroyed or consumed by Corruption. Now, Sunny was alone.

Forlorn, forsaken.

Until...

Sunny slowly manifested himself into existence.

His flesh was neither stone nor flesh. Instead, it was something in between, possessing the same stonelike quality as the Jade Mantle. Instead of a heart, a furnace of divine flame burned in his chest. Instead of blood, ruby dust flowed in his veins.

Impossibly thin diamond strings permeated his body like nerves, creating an intricate and beautiful sorcerous array. Essence flowed through them, giving him life.

Giving him power.

'I am a Stone Saint.'

The vast shadow finally manifested into a dark colossus, towering at least two hundred meters above ground. His powerful body was encased in a fearsome suit of black armor, which had been forged by the Prince of the Underworld — his father — himself.

Two furious crimson lights were burning in the darkness that nestled behind the visor of his helmet.

His stonelike body was heavy as a mountain, but could also become

as light as a feather. His every move carried crushing weight, and empowered by the Evening Star, he felt as if he could tear down the world.

His mind was deep and unfathomable. His will was indomitable.

Sunny knew then he had succeeded.

He had shadowed the Attributes and Abilities of a Stone Saint… [Battle Master], [Stalwart], and others. Some of them, like the [Flame of Divinity] and the [Underworld Armament], he had already possessed, but they permeated his being differently now.

He was now a being similar to Saint… but not Saint herself. After all, Stone Saints were individuals, just like humans were. Each of them possessed their own unique skills and followed their own paths, and while they shared natural affinities — and affinity to true darkness, for example — they were not the same.

Saint was a Transcendent Devil who commanded true darkness and had recently learned to control the concept of nothingness to further her goals.

Sunny, meanwhile… was a Supreme Titan who commanded shadows.

So, the Stone Saint he had become was a Supreme Titan and a ruler of shadows, as well.

The Fifth Step was complete. Everything was as it should have been.

No… something was still missing.

'Why... am I... unarmed?'

Reaching into the shadows, Sunny pulled a giant sword and a giant shield out of them.

Looking up at the Cursed Tyrant and the Sacred shade battling each other…

He raised his sword and hit it against the rim of his shield twice, each strike resounding above the crumbling mountain like the ringing of a

colossal gong.

Announcing his unshakeable resolve to the world, challenging whoever dared to stand against him, and heralding death and destruction to his enemies.

Chapter-2405: Rulers of the Sky

Answering the deafening call of the ringing shield, two bestial crimson flames ignited in the darkness cast by the towering black colossus. A chilling growl drowned out the howling of the wind, and something massive rose from the shadows at its feet.

It was an enormous wolf, its fur moving in the wind like tongues of dark flame. The size of the Sacred shade was massive, and yet, it only reached the armored giant's hip. Together, they looked like a warrior and his warhound — both born from shadows, surrounded by darkness, and full of murderous intent.

"Good boy…"

Sunny grinned behind the visor of his helmet.

At the same time, he felt a pang of surprise.

'What the... I can talk?'

Saint never did, so he often assumed that Stone Saints had simply not been given that ability by Nether. But, as it turned out, his assumption was wrong.

The Shadow Wolf lowered its head to the ground, letting out another terrifying growl.

Sunny had summoned it… because he could. Usually, the strain of controlling a Sacred shade would have been too great for him to attempt calling upon more than one at a time — not impossible, but too strenuous to be useful in most situations.

However, since Sunny was not controlling Condemnation… could not control it, rather, and had not summoned the shade of the Cursed Tyrant through usual means, he still had the capacity to call forth a

helper.

The Wolf was the strongest of his shades, so it was an obvious choice.

Now, there was only one question left to answer.

Would he and his Sacred shade be enough to defeat the Puppeteer and bring Condemnation down once more?

Somewhere outside the cocoon of black silk surrounding the Snow Castle, most of the sun had already drowned in the sea of clouds. There was not much time left before the sunset extinguished itself — mere minutes, perhaps. Not that time often stayed reliable in a battle between deities… unless the deities wanted it to.

And the Puppeteer would definitely attempt to hold out until night fell, even if it meant forcing time to run faster.

So, Sunny had to kill it swiftly.

Looking up, he saw Condemnation collapsing under its own weight. The shadow of the Cursed Tyrant was grievously diminished, shrinking to half its former size. It was both falling and falling apart, its immense body unable to sustain itself.

But Condemnation was still unshaken and ready to continue the battle. Only the material vessel of the vast shade had been damaged — the nebulous force itself remained unscathed. It was going to create a new body for itself soon enough, this time from the fabric of Ariel's Game.

The Puppeteer, meanwhile, fluttered its great wings and rose into the air, pushing itself off Condemnation's collapsing chest and sending the crumbling giant plummeting to the ground faster.

The sight of the enormous moth opening its wings above the falling enemy looked both majestic and undeniably nightmarish, as if the night itself gave birth to the harrowing Spirit of Doubt.

That… was going to be a problem.

The mountain shuddered when the crushing mass of Condemnation

impacted against the fractured slope. Sunny stood as if he was rooted to the ground, as solid as the dark caverns of the Underworld, easily maintaining his balance. He considered the situation for a heartbeat, then shifted his gaze slightly, looking to his right.

There, a hill of black silk was coming undone, sliced apart by Slayer's sharp blades. An angry roar tore free of the mass of lifeless strands, and then, a magnificent dragon followed, clawing its way out of the silken barrow.

Kai climbed out of the suffocating black cradle and rose above it, looking at the great wings of the Puppeteer, which obscured the sky. Slayer was standing nearby, dwarfed by his size.

The graceful Shadow had sheathed her swords, and was already summoning her bow.

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then thrust his sword to the sky, pointing it at the abominable moth.

"Kai, Slayer… bring it down!"

He knew that he could kill the Puppeteer… he was sure of it, without a shadow of a doubt. However, doing so while the eerie black moth stayed in the air was going to be problematic, since Stone Saints were not made for flying.

Of course, Sunny could still diminish the weight of his towering body and leap into the sky, but the Puppeteer would have an advantage in an aerial battle. Similarly, Sunny would have an advantage on the ground.

Luckily, one of his companions had a claim to the title of the ruler of the sky, as well. Kai was a dragon, after all, and while he was not powerful enough to slay the giant moth, he could at least prevent it from keeping its distance from Sunny.

As Sunny's voice thundered above the quaking mountain, Kai and Slayer swayed under its devastating force.

Then, they exchanged a glance. The graceful Shadow leaped onto the back of the dark dragon, and the dragon soared into the sky, rushing

to meet the Puppeteer. Tendrils of black silk pursued them, but Kai dodged them nimbly, flying much faster than the silk could move.

Sunny then lowered his sword and pointed at the ruins of Condemnation — and at an eerie vortex of shadows, obsidian, shattered rock, glacial ice, and black silk spinning slowly at its heart as it swallowed more and more matter, reforming itself.

"That's your prey. Go get it!"

The Wolf was, first and foremost, a predator. And a predator knew how to target its prey when it was weak, weakened, or ailing.

The Sacred shade burst into a leap, rushing at its rogue kin.

Sunny, meanwhile…

Drew his right hand back. And then, he tossed his enormous shield with all the power of a Supreme Titan, sending it flying into the black sky like an obliterating discus.

Right at the Puppeteer's eerie form.

The giant black moth fluttered its wings, barely evading the giant shield.

It was distracted for a short moment, though.

And in that moment, a devastating sonic blast slammed into one of its wings, while the other was pierced by a deadly arrow.

Chapter-2406: Spirit of Doubt

The Puppeteer's wings were mighty… but they were also brittle.

Relatively speaking, of course. In truth, there was hardly a more indestructible material out there than the wings of a Cursed Tyrant. However, it was being attacked by Kai and Slayer — two Transcendent beings who had received the boon of ash thrice and were empowered by Sunny's will as a result.

Their ability to wound a fallen deity was the result of six Snow figures being removed from the board, most of them of the Cursed Rank. The deaths of those Cursed abominations fueled this attack.

Slayer's arrow tore a hole in the Puppeteer's left wing. Riding on the back of a dragon, the graceful Shadow had drawn and aimed her bow deftly — the arrow came from under the dark discus Sunny had thrown, obscured from sight by its spinning mass. The eerie moth had received almost no time to react.

Kai's sonic attack, meanwhile, was less focused. It failed to rip the great black wing, but it did push it aside with great concussive force, making the wing fold.

Suddenly unbalanced, the Puppeteer tilted in the air and lost control of its flight. It plummeted down, straining to regain balance while countless strands of silk reached down from the dome of the black cocoon to catch it.

However, the shield the giant moth had dodged slammed into them a moment later, pushing the silk tendrils away.

Sunny lowered his torso, and then launched his towering body up the slope, running to the spot where the Puppeteer would fall.

He was not going to receive another chance to end the harrowing

battle, most likely… but that was fine.

His stone mind was calm and composed, full of nothing but cold calculation.

He could feel the depths of the mountain vibrating under his heavy footsteps, and as it did, his movements accelerated.

Great tendrils of black silk rose from the surface of the shattered slope to entangle him, but he cut some with his sword and sidestepped the others, refusing to allow them to bind him and slow him down.

The Strings of Doubt tried to catch him in their vile embrace, as well. However, they failed to pierce his skin, and fell powerlessly to be crushed under his feet, finding no purchase in his stalwart mind and spirit.

'Doubt…'

How could this cowardly, insidious Spirit dare to set its sight on him, a champion of the Underworld?

The feeble moth was going to learn the price of its arrogance soon.

In a way… the Stone Saint almost pitied the Puppeteer.

Of all the beings in the world, it just had to encounter them three — him and his two companions. Not only had they slaughtered its thralls, but each of them was also singularly resistant to the sinister moth's dreadful powers.

The Stone Saint could not be infected by doubt because he had an indomitable spirit, the Shadow Huntress was immune to its jaws because of her pure soul, while the dragon was simply someone who lived his life with tenacious diligence.

Even if the Puppeteer tried to find three enemies it was woefully ill-suited to fight on purpose, it would have struggled to find anyone better matched against it than a Child of Nether and his companions.

It was almost as if fate had brought them here.

…Or destiny, perhaps.

The giant moth managed to right itself moments before impacting the ground. Its wings unfolded once again, pushing the winds down with their immensity, but it was already too late. The inertia of its fall was too great to stop in time.

It hit the ground hard, its damaged legs buckling. The Puppeteer fell awkwardly on its side, supporting itself with the two unscathed front legs. It raised its head, looking at the approaching Stone Colossus with no emotion apparent in its huge, black eyes.

Did it only seem that way… or was there a hint of fear in them, for a split moment?

The Stone Saint did not know. What he did know, however, was that he was still too far away from the grounded moth.

It could still get away, if it moved immediately.

"Wolf!"

Just then, a bestial shadow lunged at the Puppeteer from behind, terrible jaws ripping into its wings.

A haunting song descended upon it from above, pushing it into the ground.

A swift arrow fell like a comet, blooming into a devastating explosion.

None of these attacks threatened the Puppeteer's life.

However, they did hold it in place for a few precious moments.

And by the time the giant moth recovered…

The Stone Saint was already upon it.

His heavy sword rose, ready to fall and sever the abominable Tyrant in two. He looked the fallen deity directly in the eye and said with ruthless finality:

"Die."

But just before the sword fell…

The Puppeteer's long antennae vibrated strangely.

And suddenly, the world was frozen.

The stone colossus and the giant moth stood motionlessly, looking at each other. The strands of black silk remained still as they descended upon them like a black avalanche. The ferocious Wolf did not move, its fangs tearing into the black wing.

The dark dragon was frozen in the air as it dove to the ground with its wings folded, the small figure of the beautiful huntress on its back endlessly retrieving an arrow from her quiver.

The world was still and silent.

The Stone Saint was still and silent too, unable to move.

And in that silence, a soft voice resounded from all around him, asking a strange question:

"Do you... really want to kill me?"

The Stone Saint smiled coldly behind the visor of his helmet.

"Of course."

There was silence once more.

Then, the Puppeteer asked dispassionately:

"...Why?"

The Stone Saint frowned.

'What a preposterous question…'

There was a reason, naturally.

There had to have been.

But that reason had belonged to someone else. A different being, made from different things. To a shadow that was full of doubt, and hope, and pain.

The Stone Saint could not ever remember that shadow's name. How was he supposed to remember its reasons?

His frown deepened.

"I… don't remember."

The giant moth seemed to look at him with pity.

Its soft voice enveloped him like a rustle of fine silk, making the crimson flames burning in his eyes dim a little.

"Are you sure you want to kill me, Child of Nether?"

Chapter-2407: Certain Death

The Stone Saint hesitated.

The Spirit of Doubt was kneeling on the shattered ground in front of him, its black wings broken and torn. The eerie moth was great and terrible… however, so was the Stone Saint. He was the Jade Titan, and the Mantle of the Underworld lay heavy on his shoulders. If he wanted to kill the Cursed creature, the only choice it had was to die.

Even now, the Puppeteer was only keeping itself alive by slowing down the flow of time to such a crawl that it seemed to stand still. But interfering with an absolute law to this degree was an unbearable burden even for a being like the eerie moth… it would not be able to hold time still for very long, let alone indefinitely.

So, if the Stone Saint wanted to kill the Spirit of Doubt, he could.

But did he want to?

Why would he, indeed?

The Stone Saint looked at the giant moth coldly, feeling a strange compulsion to answer its question honestly.

"I am not sure. However… I burn with the Flame of Divinity, while you are an abomination of the Void. Are we not enemies, you and I? Are we not destined to maim and slay each other? I am holding a sword, while you are on your knees. Is that not reason enough to kill you?"

The Puppeteer's enormous black eyes glistened like beautiful gems, reflecting countless versions of the Stone Saint and his merciless blade in their compound depth.

It spoke softly:

"Ah… but look around you, warrior of the Underworld. Look who brought me to my knees. The Wolf, the Huntress, the Giant, and the Dragon. They are shadows of Death; he is a herald of Night. The servants of the gods surround us, you and me. The same gods whom your Prince is at war with. Are they not your true enemy, instead of me?"

The Stone Saint gazed at him coldly.

'At war… with…'

The furious flame burning in his chest blazed, full of pride and animosity.

The Spirit of Doubt was right. The gods were enemies of the Prince of the Underworld, and therefore, of his children. So many had been shattered on the countless battlefields of the War… so many had fallen.

So many were yet to fall.

There was no peace left anywhere in the world. There was no mercy left, either. Surrender was impossible, and those who lost would not be spared. So, the war could only end when the gods fell… or when all of existence fell.

The Puppeteer's soft voice flowed into his ears like honey:

"You are a child of Nether, and therefore, of the Forgotten God… who dreams in the Void, who dreams of the Void. I am a being of the Void, and while there is a conflict between us… doesn't it pale in comparison to the conflict between us and those who serve the vile gods? Are we not more alike than we are apart? Are we not… allies, before we are enemies?"

'Allies...'

The Stone Saint regarded the kneeling moth silently, then shifted his gaze to the frozen figures of his own companions. His frown deepened.

The three shadows. The beautiful dragon whose scales were the color

of midnight, its eyes burning like silver stars.

'The servants of the gods.'

The vile, hateful, cruel gods.

Why was he fighting side by side with the enemy?

The Stone Saint looked at the Spirit of Doubt.

"You… might be right."

There was indeed a semblance of truth to what the sinister moth had said.

He smiled coldly behind the visor of his helmet.

"But, Spirit of Doubt… did you not say it yourself?"

The Stone Saint gathered his will, sensing the pressure of the Snow Domain crushing him.

"That you made a deal with Weaver."

Something about the Puppeteer's eyes changed.

But it was too late.

Not letting the eerie black moth say anything else, the Stone Saint sent his will and authority outward.

"And while the gods are truly hateful… no one is more odious and vile than the traitor, Demon of Fate. You have aided Weaver, Spirit of Doubt."

His will enveloped the fractured mountain, crashing against the Puppeteer's authority.

"...And for that, I will kill you."

There was no hesitation to his sword anymore. No doubt. No mercy.

Only certainty and finality.

Only death.

The Stone Saint poured his indomitable willpower into assaulting the Snow Domain and challenging its reign over the mountain. He was not strong enough, not vast enough to usurp the Puppeteer's authority… but he did not need to, either.

He was someone who had survived countless battlefields of the dreadful War, after all. Someone who had led legions and won victories against the Divine Host. Born for battle, he was proficient in all forms of strategy and tactics.

He was a master of war, and so, he knew how to break an impregnable obstacle by striking at its pressure point.

He knew how to break an enemy who refused to be broken.

For the Spirit of Doubt… that pressure point, the fatal vulnerability, was the strain it was enduring to exert influence on the absolute law.

The Stone Saint did not use his strength to crush the authority of the Cursed Tyrant. Instead, he added his strength to the devastating pressure of the endless mass of time wishing to flow free, and saw the dam built by the Puppeteer cracking.

A moment later, it collapsed.

The fact that it collapsed was apparent from the fact that there was a difference between the previous moment and the next, to begin with.

And in the moment after that…

Everything happened quickly.

Time resumed its flow. The giant moth was already lunging forward, its two unscathed legs moving with terrifying speed.

One pierced the armor of the Stone Saint like paper, impaling him. The other batted his sword away, then pushed his arm down, breaking it.

Terrible pain washed over his mind, blurring his vision.

The two of them were suddenly face to face, with only a few meters separating the fearsome visor of the jade armor from the dreadful moth's enthralling black eyes.

The Stone Saint saw himself reflected in the thousand black gems, rivers of ruby dust streaming down his breastplate.

The Puppeteer strained its scythe-like leg, aiming to extinguish the flame burning in his chest.

The Stone Saint raised his free hand above his head as if wanting to bring his fist down on the enemy in desperation.

Instead, though, he caught the giant dark discus of the round shield he had tossed into the sky before…

And brought it down with the weight of a mountain.

The rim of the shield crushed the Puppeteer's neck and went through it, slicing the Cursed Tyrant's head clean off.

The gargantuan body of the moth shuddered, and then went limp.

Its head rolled to the ground, staring into the lightless sky blindly.

The tendrils of black silk rustled as they fell, and in their rustle…

The Stone Saint thought that he heard an echo of a soft, dying voice.

"You… lied to me... Weaver..."

The voice had only wished to be free.

The last vestiges of the molten sun drowned in the sea of crimson clouds, and darkness descended upon the world.

The cursed Spirit of Doubt, Puppeteer, was no more.

Chapter-2408: Lost You Forever

[...You have slain an enemy.]

The Stone Saint tilted his head, looking at the corpse of the fallen deity.

'Whose voice was that?'

Many things seemed strange now that the battle was over. He vaguely senses that he was supposed to feel something now that the Spirit of Doubt was dead. Was it a sense of triumph? Or a sense of loss?

It was a rare and incredible feat, for someone Supreme to slay someone Cursed — not to mention a Cursed Tyrant, and one as insidious as the Puppeteer had been to boot. But the Stone Saint was not glad. He was a champion of the underworld, after all.

His victory was a matter of course.

He only felt pity that the beautiful black moth was no more. It had fought valiantly and deserved his respect. The death of an enemy like that was not a joyous occasion.

But it was also not something to feel so strangely about.

So why?

It was as if he was forgetting something.

'Ah… I see.'

The battle was not over yet.

Raising his head, the Stone Saint looked at the approaching dragon.

The shadow of a wolf was sniffing the corpse of the giant moth nearby. There was another shadow not too far away, as well — a dark vortex consuming everything it touched, a new vessel almost formed around it.

And a third. A graceful woman who moved like a dancer, hiding on the dragon's back.

The servants of the gods.

As the Stone Saint observed, the shadow of a huntress leaped off the dragon's back. She drew her bow in the air, and an arrow that carried an imprint of death tore the fabric of the world, piercing the heart of the dark vortex.

'They are fighting each other.'

The Stone Saint felt a hint of relief.

That was going to make his job easier… not that the task of dealing with these enemies seemed particularly arduous.

…He could kill them in a heartbeat.

High above, the black veil obscuring the world was falling apart. The silk covering the surface of the mountain was withering, too. Countless strings of it were turning brittle and pale, the beautiful black gleam of their smooth surface slowly wasting away. It was as if the mountain was turning grey with age.

And something else was happening, as well. It was as if… as if there was an invisible force radiating from somewhere far away, hidden within the sea of clouds.

Pushing him. Rejecting him from this world.

The Stone Saint frowned as the dragon landed near and spoke, his melodious voice thundering above the fractured mountain:

"Sunny! We've… we've won!"

The towering stone colossus looked down at the dragon silently, ruby

dust still streaming down the polished jade of his armor.

There was something strange about that, as well.

Why was he bleeding?

Then again…

Why wouldn't he?

'I need to finish this battle swiftly and tend to my wounds."

"...Sunny?"

Nearby, the wolf shadow raised its snout and peered at the Stone Saint. Its fur bristled, and it backed away slowly, letting out a threatening growl.

Far away, more arrows pierced the dark vortex, and the shadow huntress landed gracefully on the slope, unsheathing her twin swords as she dashed toward it.

'It is better to kill them now that they are divided.'

The Stone Saint looked at the Night Dragon coldly.

…This, too, was a battlefield of the War.

His sword moved faster than a blade of its size was supposed to. The Stone Saint targeted the shadow wolf first, vanquishing it back into the Shadow Realm with a single strike.

Something strange happened then… it almost felt as if something had returned to him the moment the figure of the tenebrous beast became a torrent of shadows and dissolved into nothingness.

The Stone Saint did not pay it much attention, because the dragon had to die next.

"What are you doing?! Stop!"

There was a powerful compulsion in the dragon's voice, but it was just as powerless against him as the Strings of Doubt had been. The

question, however, slowed down his sword by a fraction of a second. That was enough for the great beast to avoid a fatal wound… but not to evade the stonelike blade entirely.

It sliced the midnight scales easily and bit deeply into his flesh, drawing silver blood. The dragon let out a pained scream and staggered away.

It was not going to get far, of course…

"I am putting down a dog of the gods."

The Stone Saint tensed his body, preparing to lunge forward and finish the enemy once and for all.

"S—Sunny, stop!"

Who was the creature calling out to? One of its allies?

The huntress, perhaps…

If so, its calls were in vain. The huntress was going to die under the Stone Saint's sword soon enough.

He tore through the compulsion effortlessly, rushing forward as he raised his sword.

The dragon only had a split second to live.

"N—nephis, Cassie, Effie!"

He lingered.

'What… is it…'

"Kai, Rain, Jet!"

The Stone Saint froze, the blade of his sword lightly touching the dragon's neck.

"Noctis, Ananke! Remember, damn it! Aiko, Julius, Beth!"

'Those names…'

His eyes widened.

"Kim, Luster, Quentin, Dorn, Belle, Samara, Obel!"

The dragon did not move either, looking at him with fear and hope in his eyes.

Somewhere far away, the vortex of darkness dissolved, disappearing without a trace. It almost seemed as if it was absorbed into the ebony body of the shadow huntress.

The huntress then spared them a glance, and vanished as well.

The dragon stared at Sunny, and then bellowed.

"How could you forget?! Snap out of it, now!"

Sunny stared at him back from his great height.

Then, he lowered his sword and shook his head.

"Is there really a need to shout so loudly? I am not deaf, you know."

Hiding the shiver from his voice, he hurriedly dismissed the form of a Stone Saint and turned into his cozy, familiar human self.

Granted, there was a hole in his chest, and the arm that had just recently regained its mobility was now broken. But being himself still felt wonderful.

Sunny stemmed the bleeding and shuddered, remembering how close he had come to killing Kai.

And to losing himself entirely, forever.

'That... that was too close.'

In the end, it was the memories of the people Kai reminded him about that had brought him back… barely.

Their names, and the fact that even as a Stone Saint, he still possessed the same Flaw.

When Kai asked him how he could have forgotten, Sunny had found no answer, but felt compelled to provide one. And when he went looking for an answer, the persona of the Jade Titan unraveled like a mirage.

He was not sure what would have happened if he had spent more time wearing it, though, and fell into the delusion of a foreign form deeper.

"To answer your question, I did not really forget. I just convinced myself that I was someone else very well. I am a very persuasive person, you know? I am so persuasive, in fact, that I once convinced myself into existence."

That was how he had crossed the Hollow Mountains without becoming nothing.

Kai stared at him in utter disbelief.

Which looked quite odd, considering that he was still in the form of a dragon.

"Convinced yourself… into existence. What?"

Sunny shrugged.

"It's true."

Kai released his transformation and turned into a human once more. There was a flabbergasted expression on his sunken, tired face.

There was also blood running from a deep cut on his shoulder, which made Sunny wince internally.

"...Indeed. It's really you!"

All around them, the cocoon of black silk was falling apart.

The corpse of the Puppeteer towered above them like a dark hill.

The Snow Tyrant was dead.

Sunny stared at the enormous severed head for a few moments, then sighed.

'Find peace within me, you sinister moth. Your nightmare was long... but now, it is over.'

He had to hurry. His enemy was dead, which meant that Sunny had precious little time to achieve what he had come here to achieve.

"Come on. We need to find the Snow Castle!"

The Death Game was coming to an end.

Chapter-2409: End Game

The Snow Tyrant was dead, and the game was over.

Sunny could feel a subtle pressure, as if the realm of Ariel's Game was rejecting him. He suspected that it would expel him soon enough… but actually, he had no idea what exactly would happen.

The figures placed on the board by Weaver and Ariel had stayed in place for thousands of years, waiting for new players to arrive — but they never did, forcing the captive Tyrants to take matters into their own hands. The two daemons had never finished the game, either.

Ariel had simply surrendered when pushed into a hopeless situation.

So, there was no telling what would happen next.

Would Sunny have to search for a way out of Ariel's Game himself? Considering the sensation of rejection he felt, it did not seem so. Would he be freed from his role as the Ash Tyrant and returned to Ravenheart, then?

What about his figures?

…What about the remaining figures of the defeated side?

Would the two Cursed Devils stay imprisoned in the Death Game, or would they be liberated from their roles as well? Would they be purged by the harrowing entity dwelling beneath the clouds, instead?

He did not know.

But come hell or high water, he had to hurry and get his prize.

'Hell or high water, huh…'

Gods knew that Sunny had experienced his fair share of hells, and his

fair share of dreadful bodies of water as well.

"Find the figurine, Kai!"

He ignored the pain in his broken arm and torn chest, turning to look at the peak of the mountain. There had to be an entrance to the Snow Castle somewhere up there.

Sunny cast his shadow sense into the depths of the mountain, feeling a sense of urgency.

Yes, he did not know what was going to happen… but something was telling him that they did not have a lot of time left.

The expelling pressure was mounting, and Sunny already had to exert his will in order to stay rooted in the miniature realm of Ariel's Game.

The gargantuan body of the Puppeteer loomed above him, hiding tantalizing treasures. The wings of the great moth could be used to craft incredible armor and garments, its limbs could be forged into god-slaying weapons, and the five soul shards hidden somewhere in the depths of its corpse could become anchors for the spellweave of immensely powerful Memories.

But there was no time to harvest any of these sacred relics. Even if there were… Sunny was not sure that he would have. He had seen how the world itself seemed to have been tainted and corrupted by drops of Puppeteer's ichor. Was it really a good idea, to covet its treasures, even in death? It was as if even the corpse of the fallen deity was a source of unceasing Corruption.

Perhaps these treasures were not sacred, but cursed instead.

So, the only thing Sunny wanted to find was the jade figurine of the Snow Tyrant. He needed to hurry.

He had already gained a lot by defeating the Spirit of Doubt, anyway.

The Puppeteer's shade was now in his Soul Sea. He had mastered the fifth step of Shadow Dance, as well… granted, using this mastery was an awfully perilous affair — it had almost cost Kai his life, after all.

But even if Sunny abstained from performing the Fifth Step in the future, he would still reap the benefits of having mastered it.

Because Serpent had to have become a Supreme Titan as a result. And if Sunny did become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell again one day… who knew? A shiny new Aspect Legacy Relic could be waiting for him, ready to be claimed.

And there was Slayer, as well.

Sunny might have been lost in the form of the Jade Titan, but he had not missed her destroying the shade of Condemnation.

After all this time, Slayer had hunted down her prey, after all.

'So persistent…'

Unlike the Wolf, however, whose shade had returned to the lightless expanse of his soul after being destroyed, Condemnation was simply gone. It was absorbed by the murderous Shadow, somehow… almost like a sacrifice she had made to herself.

After that, Slayer simply vanished.

Just like Saint and other Shadows would vanish to return to the nurturing dark flames of Sunny's soul and undergo an evolution.

'Slayer… is evolving?'

Would she gain a higher Rank? A higher Class?

Maybe even unseal her Aspect?

He was both excited by that prospect and wary of it.

Sunny felt excitement for obvious reasons, since the more powerful his Shadows were, the more powerful he himself would become. His wariness was also easy to understand.

'Ah. Our weekly duels… are about to become way more bothersome, aren't they?'

Still, this was a boon he had received in the battle against the Puppeteer, too.

He looked at the head of the giant moth silently.

Sunny used to think that the Mountain King had been the final form of the Puppeteer Worm. But now that he had met the Spirit of Doubt, he knew that he had been wrong.

The Mountain King had never been the Puppeteer, and neither had it been one of the Puppeteer's kin. Rather… he was merely a discarded chrysalis that a worm of doubt had left behind once, a long time ago, after using it as a host to mature into a dreadful moth. A mortal king who had become infected by doubt and turned into a monster, unleashing a harrowing curse upon the world.

That curse continued to grow and mature until it became the Spirit of Doubt, Puppeteer.

And now, it was dead.

If Sunny was honest with himself… he still couldn't believe that he had won. That he had killed a Cursed Tyrant, and one as insidious as the Puppeteer had been, at that. Granted, he and his companions were so perfectly matched against the sinister moth that it almost seemed like that entire clash had been arranged by someone for their benefit.

If it had been… Sunny did not have to guess by whom.

'Weaver…'

Just how deep did the influence of the nebulous daemon go? What had the Demon of Fate longed to achieve? Were all of them… merely puppets dancing to the movement of the strings tied to Weaver's seven clawed fingers?

The Strings of Fate…

"Found it!"

Kai flew across withering silk, landing in a storm of snow near Sunny.

The jade figurine lay on his palm, wearing a crown.

Sunny smiled weakly.

"Yeah. I found it, as well."

Out there, in the depths of the mountain, his shadow sense discovered a colossal cavern, and a castle built within it out of ice.

The cocoon of black silk had entirely fallen apart by now. The mountain was quaking, the fractures covering its slopes growing wider.

Something was moving beneath the clouds.

Sunny strained his will, forcing himself to stay rooted in the world that wanted to expel him, and grabbed Kai by the shoulder.

"Let's go!"

With that, he used the last of his essence and pulled them both into the shadows.

The enormous cavern was coming undone, great chunks of ice falling down from its ceiling and shattering into myriad shards with deafening roars. None of them were able to damage the castle that stood in the center of the cavern, though.

It looked almost exactly like the Ash Castle, only made of ice and shrouded in snow. Sunny did not waste any time studying the nuances of its architecture, though, pulling himself and Kai directly into the vast hollow emptiness of the main keep.

There, snow covered the floor instead of ash… most of the great ice chamber was filled with countless threads of black silk, however, which blocked the path like a web. These ones did not seem to be withering, yet, and retained their startling durability.

Sunny could have cut a path through the web of black silk if he wanted to, but he was grievously wounded, on the verge of essence exhaustion, and pressed for time on top of that. So, he simply shoved as much silk as he could into his Soul Sea, clearing a narrow tunnel

to the heart of the chamber.

There, a jade altar stood in front of a circular pit. There was no smoke rising from the pit, and no lava seething deep below… instead, there was only a bottomless dark well permeated by killing cold. The cold was somewhat bearable near the altar, but deep in the darkness, nothing could survive its frigid embrace.

Not even a Supreme Titan like Sunny.

"Hurry…"

He limped to the pit, dragging Kai along. The pressure Ariel's Game exerted on him, trying to remove him from the game board, continued to mount — by now, Sunny had to strain all of his willpower to resist it, and his endurance was swiftly running out.

'Argh…'

When they reached the dark pit, Sunny hesitated for a moment and looked at his hand. There, two jade figurines lay side by side — one pristine and wearing a crown, the other bestial and smeared in blood.

They were the figures of the Puppeteer and the Rat King.

Sunny felt that what he had come for — the fragment of Weaver's Lineage — was hidden in the Snow Tyrant figurine.

The other one could still reveal a priceless truth to him, though. It was an invaluable treasure… a piece of inheritance left behind by Ariel, the Demon of Dread.

Still, he forced himself to pick up the Snow Beast figurine and offer it to Kai.

"Here… you deserved it. Take it."

Kai stared at the blood-smeared figurine for a while, tempted deeply by its promise.

His eyes trembled.

But then, he smiled faintly and shook his head.

"No. It will be of more use to you."

Sunny studied him silently, then asked tensely:

"Are you sure? This thing… it reveals truths. Any truth — anything you ever wanted to know, anything you ever wished to find an answer to. Yes, I know that you have suffered too much truth because of your Flaw, but still… you will not get a chance like this again."

Kai remained quiet for a moment.

Eventually, his smile widened a little.

"I know. But… I have already learned a lot during this journey. I have learned so much. So… I'm good, I think. I already know everything I need to know. Thank you, though — I appreciate it."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then nodded and looked away with a sigh.

"You're a weirdo, you know that?"

Kai laughed.

"Takes one to know one."

Sunny took a deep breath and tried to smile, as well.

"See you on the other side, then."

With that, he tossed both figurines into the pit and prepared himself.

As the jade figures fell into the darkness, he remembered the previous times he absorbed fragments of Weaver's Lineage. It had hurt like hell each time.

In fact, it was some of the worst pain Sunny had ever experienced.

A pale smile twisted his lips.

"Oh, by the way. If I start screaming and writhing in pain, pay it no

heed. Just make sure that I don't bite off my tongue or claw out my eyes, if it's not too much trouble. Well, one eye might be okay..."

Kai blinked.

"Huh? Wait, what?"

But Sunny did not hear him.

Because he was already someplace else.

He was receiving his prize.

Chapter-2410: Myriad of Stars

…The world was made of fire. Countless trees were burning, toppling with sorrowful groans. Ash obscured the sky, and unbearable heat melted the sanity of those who still fought in the boundless inferno.

A Sacred Beast was galloping through the fire — a beautiful white stag with antlers made of pure gold, its holy presence soothing the flames and saving the young sapling that had not succumbed to the world-ending blaze yet. Flowers and verdant grass sprouted where its hooves touched the ground.

Its ivory hooves, however, were smeared with blood and ruby dust, having crushed the skulls of countless soldiers of the Demon Army.

Suddenly, a fierce figure lunged at the stag from the darkness and smoke. It was an enormous black leopard, its eyes burning with murderous fury. The leopard was smaller than the Sacred Beast, but its size did not seem to matter — its jaws closed on the white stag's throat, drawing rivers of golden ichor.

The two beasts collided and rolled through the flames, crushing countless trees. The stag managed to throw the leopard off and rose to its feet, lowering its head to impale the predator with its great antlers. Ichor was flowing from its torn neck, but it was still full of vitality and tremendous power.

The leopard, meanwhile, had already been heavily wounded and bleeding from dozens of terrible wounds before their battle began. Now, it was all but defenseless before the charging stag…

Then, however, the figure of the black leopard rippled, and a split second later, it turned into a stag as well — this one as black as night, but otherwise almost a perfect copy of the Sacred Beast in front of it.

The two beasts collided, their antlers intertwining. The black stag threw the white one to the ground and changed again, becoming a boar this time. Its tusks dug into the stag's belly, and more ichor spilled on the ashen ground.

Eventually, the battle was over.

The Sacred Beast lay butchered on the pyre of burning wood, and in front of it stood a woman in torn leather armor, her beautiful face bloodied and covered in ash.

Harrowing wounds littered her body, and there was a strange emptiness in her eyes.

The fire was consuming the world, and the battle continued to rage around her, but she seemed oblivious to the carnage.

Swaying heavily, the woman took a step back and fell down.

As she stubbornly struggled to rise, her blood soaking the ash, the flames crawled closer and closer.

Before they consumed her, however, someone appeared out of the groans of dying trees, looking down at her silently.

It was a tall figure wrapped in a nebulous mantle, wearing a fearsome mask of black polished wood. The mask snarled fiercely, but the gaze of the stranger was cold enough to douse the inferno that surrounded them.

A voice that sounded like a myriad of dying curses resounded from behind the mask, addressing the woman:

"Look at you… you're dying. How pitiful. How disappointing. Is this all you are capable of? Is this all you are? You are so simple, so weak. How dare you be so weak, my enemy?"

There was no answer.

A porcelain hand appeared from the folds of the nebulous mantle. Seven clawed fingers grabbed the collar of the woman's torn cuirass and violently wrenched her to her feet.

A chilling growl resounded from behind the mask, making the flames reel back in fear.

"Do you even remember your own name, pathetic thing?"

The woman stared at the black mask absently.

Then, however, a hint of recognition ignited in her eyes.

Her lips moved, and she said hoarsely:

"You… I killed you."

The masked figure laughed.

"Did you? Did you really think that someone like you could have killed me? That you are qualified to kill me? Me, the Demon of Fate?!"

Weaver threw the woman to the ground and grew still, staring at her with a chilling, inexplicable emotion.

Then, the towering daemon crouched near her and whispered in a thousand insidious voices:

"Well, maybe you did. Maybe you are. Maybe you will. That is your fate, after all, and you are Fated. So, tell me…"

Weaver's voice turned into a litany of chilling snarls, full of contempt and indignation:

"...who gave you permission to die? You are not allowed to die yet, wretch. You and I are not done yet, so even if all existence ends, you must remember your fate. You must remember me."

A porcelain hand moved, suffocating the inferno around them. The flames died in terror, their very idea extinguished and erased from the tapestry of fate forever.

"You can forget everything else, everyone else — you can even forget your own name. But don't you dare forget the name of Weaver, the Demon of Fate. We must see each other again, you and I. So… come

find me in the Shadow Realm. Come and see if someone like you can really kill Weaver. Then, after you've learned the true meaning of despair… then, I'll allow you to die, Orphne of the Nine."

Hearing her own name, the woman… Orphne… seemed to regain some of her strength. Her eyes regained their focus, and she looked at the nebulous daemon with dark, grim killing intent.

Weaver laughed and rose, turning away from the bleeding huntress.

"That's better!"

The Demon of Fate looked down, and then exhaled slowly.

Their shoulders seemed to fall, and the eerie voice resounded once again from behind the fearsome mask:

"...Are you there?"

Weaver straightened and looked up, as if seeing something no one else could see.

As if addressing someone whom no one else could hear.

"Are you watching?"

The Demon of Fate chuckled hoarsely.

"Watch well then, epigone. Let me show you… how gods die…"

And with that, Sunny suddenly became aware of himself.

'Wait… is Weaver talking… to me?'

He had a split second to feel boundless shock.

And then, the burning world shattered.

Instead, a chaotic torrent of scenes poured into his mind, too great for him to fathom.

All Sunny could discern was a few terrifying images.

An unimaginable tree whose roots were the foundation of the world, whose branches supported the weight of the sky, enveloped in flame and burning as a fiery shape wrapped itself around its colossal trunk, sawing into it with ruthless cruelty…

The moon shattering and the stars being extinguished as an unfathomable being swiped its claws at the proud towers of a beautiful white castle, the city below it drowning in a flood as all its citizens screamed and died…

A vast shadow enveloping two great armies on the bloodied sand of a boundless desert, the deafening cacophony of the harrowing battle replaced by utter silence so abruptly as to cause an even greater horror…

A great red dragon plummeting into the watery depths as golden ichor spilled from its severed neck, sinking to the bottom of a beautiful sea as its dying throes shattered and broke the world, cursing it to be plunged into mist and twilight forever…

A vast army assembling on the edge of the Abyss, somberly preparing to wage war on Death itself. The invading legions drowning in the tide of endless shadows, their blood spilling on the obsidian dust. Unfathomable figures clashing within the raging essence storms as the last, desperate battle of the Doom War shook the very foundation of existence…

And then, at the end of it all, a nebulous figure in a tattered mantle walking through the darkness with unsteady steps, cracks covering its wooden mask.

In front of the torn figure, at the heart of the Shadow Realm, was something so harrowing, unknowable, and inconceivable that simply beholding it shattered Sunny's mind into a thousand fragments, making him blind and deaf, unable to think.

And yet, he still saw…

Weaver dragging their tattered body forward as the daemons made their desperate last stand against the gods around them. A trail of ichor was left on the obsidian dust behind the Demon of Fate,

glowing with a beautiful golden glow in the cold darkness.

"Fools… all of them, such fools…"

A laughter resounded from beneath the cracked mask as Weaver finally reached their destination — the very heart of the Shadow Realm, and the unspeakable horror that was hidden there.

The Void Gate.

…The Void Gate stood wide open, now.

Sunny was mercifully blind, so he could not see what Weaver saw when they gazed beyond the Gate.

The Demon of Fate laughed again.

"Now. One final trick…"

But before the cunning daemon could do anything…

A bone blade pierced their back, tore through their flesh, and severed their shadow before exiting in a fountain of ichor from their chest.

Weaver staggered and looked back.

…There, a woman in bloodied armor was holding the hilt of a bone dagger, life swiftly draining from her cold, dark eyes.

Her face was hidden behind a tattered, torn veil, but the daemon still recognized her.

"You…"

The two of them fell down at the same time.

Golden ichor and crimson blood mixed before being swallowed by the obsidian dust.

The woman's lips twisted into a vicious smile behind the torn veil. She twisted the dagger with a faltering hand, then grew still, still smiling. Her eyes dimmed, turning hollow and glassy.

She was dead.

The Demon of Fate was not going to survive much longer, either.

A deep sigh resounded from behind the mask.

Looking at the dead woman, Weaver drew one last, arduous breath.

"...You are just in time."

The last thing Sunny saw startled and confused him, because it did not make much sense at all.

He found himself in an endless black void illuminated by a myriad of stars. Some of the stars were small and dim, while some were great and radiant. Some were connected by strings of silver light, while most were isolated from each other by the vast expanse of empty darkness.

By then, something changed.

Seven brilliant stars suddenly blazed in the void, and as strings of silver light extended from them to countless others, there was suddenly a pattern to them all. Anchored in the seven stars, the tapestry of silver light expanded, consuming more and more of the smaller stars…

And then, it extended its tendrils to the great stars that burned as brightly as the seven that had served as the catalyst to the explosion of silver strings. There were eleven constellations of them, and by the time the tendrils of silver light reached them, it was already too late to react.

By then, the tapestry had already become too vast, having consumed myriad smaller stars — all of them, perhaps — and so, the constellations could not resist.

They still tried, of course.

In the end, the tendrils of silver strings enveloped and consumed them, absorbing them into the tapestry of light.

Casting a Spell upon the Void.

Sunny gasped.

And then…

One last truth poured into him, permeating his flesh and rewriting its very nature on the fundamental level.

That last truth was the fragment of Weaver's legacy.

'Oh, hell…'

The pain was exquisite.

[End of Part I: Death Game.]

Chapter-2411: Flesh Weave

Sunny felt the final truth enter his body and infect it, spreading like a malignant code. The very nature of his mortal vessel was being changed and rewritten, his cells being torn apart and reassembled according to the new blueprint — the agony of being undone and rebuilt was simply appalling, making him stagger and fall.

It was the opposite of the gentle process of evolution and renewal that Awakened experienced when attaining a new Rank — violent, unnatural, and profoundly wrong. Sunny could feel that he was becoming something that he had never been meant to become, changing into something that he had never been meant to be.

For the fourth time.

The legacy of Weaver took root in his body, reshaping it.

This time, the change mainly affected his flesh. His muscle tissue, tendons, internal organs… everything was being reforged and tempered, becoming much more resilient and tenacious than before, full of inhuman vitality.

'How… does this even make sense?!'

He was a shadow now. An immaterial being who only possessed flesh when wishing to manifest as a human… so why the hell did it hurt so much?!

Sunny gritted his teeth and let out a tortured growl as his body was rebuilding and rearranging itself. It must have looked quite grotesque to an outside observer — his muscles were rippling and twisting like snakes under his skin, and disgusting squelching noises were resounding from inside him.

If there was one mercy, it was that he was not prone to bleeding —

otherwise, the scene would have been immeasurably morbid on top of being deeply disgusting.

"Argh! Damnation!"

Sunny slammed his fist into the floor of the Snow Castle, sending a web of cracks running through the ice.

But then, suddenly…

His agony was washed away.

A strange and subtly euphoric sensation overwhelmed him when fragments of the Weave clicked together. Blood Weave, Bone Weave, and Flesh Weave — the three parts of the nebulous daemon's Legacy responsible for the material vessel of their descendant — fused together, forming a synergetic whole.

His heart was transformed and improved by the Flesh Weave, pumping his blood, which had been altered by Blood Weave. The blood flowed through the marrow, which had been enhanced by Bone Weave, becoming enriched and renewed. The human body was an intricate and interconnected machine, and now, each part of it had been altered, empowered, and augmented to resemble that of a higher being... of a daemon, to be precise.

There were other parts of him that worked in great synergy with each other now, as well. An additional boon was born from the fusion of the three corporeal fragments of the Weave — flesh, bone, and blood.

Sunny was renewed from head to toe. Even his skin, which had already been enhanced by the Jade Mantle, received a subtle overhaul. It was a full set... well, the first part of the full set, at least.

His broken arm was already regaining mobility. The grievous wound in his chest was healing rapidly. It was not only flesh that was repairing itself, either — the acquisition of Flesh Weave had served as a catalyst, and his bones were mending themselves as well. Sunny did not lose a lot of blood often, but if he did, more would be produced at greater speed.

He let out a stifled laugh.

'Finally…'

He could finally call himself a tenacious cockroach with full confidence.

What a feat!

The transformation was coming to an end. Sunny exhaled slowly and sprawled on the ground, feeling the coldness of the ice sooth his heated body.

He felt… excellent, really. Remarkably strong, fast, agile, resilient, enduring. He was full of energy and brimming with vitality, his senses having turned sharper than before. The world was clear and crisp…

It was clearly and crisply coming undone as the mountain quaked and groaned around him. It was also straining to expel Sunny, the pressure swiftly mounting.

"Sunny! Are… are you okay?!"

Sunny turned his head and looked at Kai, who loomed above him with a worried face.

He raised a hand and formed a circle with his thumb and index finger.

"I'm... fine. I'm great, actually."

Kai let out a sigh of relief and smiled. He looked at Sunny, wishing to say something…

In the next moment, however, Kai's figure turned hazy and vanished, disappearing without a trace.

Sunny stared at the empty space where Kai had stood a split second before absently, then turned his head to stare at the ceiling.

'He was sent back to the Dream Realm.'

Sunny would be expelled from Ariel's Game soon, too.

Now that he had gotten his prize, there was no reason to stick around.

So, he inhaled deeply and waited to be banished from the artificial realm.

As he did, Sunny could not help but think about what he had learned…

About what Weaver had done.

'That… damned daemon…'

The magnitude of the truth that had been revealed to him was too great to fathom in a few short moments. There was so much knowledge he had gained, and its nature was so world-shattering and shocking, too…

His thoughts were scattered as a result.

'Weaver…'

Weaver had not been killed by Slayer, despite what Sunny was led to believe by one of the previous truths.

And yet, she did kill the Demon of Fate eventually, fulfilling her fate.

She killed Weaver twice.

Slayer… Orphne of the Nine. That was her name, even if she did not remember it. Curiously enough, Slayer had not forgotten her name during the countless years she had spent wandering the Realm of Death as a feral shadow. Instead, she had started to forget herself immediately after slaying Weaver for the first time, as if cursed as punishment for taking a daemon's life.

That first time might have been her own triumph.

But the second time… Sunny was certain that the sinister daemon had orchestrated their own ultimate death — or had at least foreseen it. Perhaps even Weaver could not escape their fate, especially not when nine Fated paragons of doom were working to bring it about.

But even if Weaver could not escape their inevitable demise, they could at least influence the tapestry of fate enough… to design it.

So how had the Demon of Fate died? And why? For what?

Well… the answer was obvious, now.

Weaver had revealed it to Sunny directly, no less.

What was it the sinister daemon had said, having foreseen that a person following in their footsteps would learn the truth of that moment one day, thousands of years in the future?

"Let me show you how gods die."

Sunny's whisper was almost inaudible.

Weaver had promised to show him how to kill the gods… and they did.

Finally, Sunny knew the answer to the questions that had been plaguing him for a decade.

How had the gods died? What had happened to the daemons?

Now, he knew.

"Weaver killed them. Weaver killed them all."

A hoarse, unbelieving laugh escaped from his lips.

Chapter-2412: Weaver's Lullaby

It had been right in front of him the whole time.

The description of Bone Weave said so:

[When children of the Forgotten God rebelled against the gods, Weaver was the only one to refuse the call of war. Despised and hunted by both sides, they disappeared. No one knew where Weaver went and what they did… until it was too late.]

Where had Weaver gone and what had Weaver done?

They had gone to create the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny had been confused when he saw the final image of the vision shown to him by the sacrifice of the Snow Tyrant figure, but now he realized the truth.

The vast void, the myriad of stars, then strings of silver light connecting them...

What he had seen was the birth of the Nightmare Spell. Or rather, its evolution from an infant state to the universal force it was today.

To Weaver's version of an absolute law.

The countless stars burning in the black void were the souls of living things. The smaller stars were the souls of humans, while the brighter ones belonged to spirits and deities. While most of them burned in lonesome solitude, some had already been connected by faint strings of silver light — those were the souls of the first carriers of the infant Nightmare Spell, like Ananke and her people.

Weaver had chosen priests among mortals first and sent them to spread the Spell among the despairing refugees of the Doom War. In

the chaos of the end of the world, it spread like wildfire, unnoticed and underestimated… laying a foundation for what would later become its final form.

Slowly reached critical mass.

All it needed to evolve into its true tyrannical splendor, at that point, was a catalyst.

And that catalyst was Weaver.

…Their death, to be precise.

When Slayer killed the Demon of Fate in front of the Void Gate… which, apparently, was hidden in the heart of Shadow God… the seven Divine soul cores of the nebulous daemon had become the anchors of the great spell woven out of Strings of Fate, completing it.

No, rather, setting off its proliferation and completion. To truly become what it was meant to be, the great spell needed much more fuel than simply Weaver's soul.

So, it devoured the gods.

It devoured the daemons, as well.

The eleven brilliant constellations Sunny saw being consumed by the vast tendrils of silver light were the six gods and the five remaining daemons.

By the time they realized what Weaver had done, it was already too late to stop it.

So, their brilliant Divine soul cores became nodes of the Spell's weave, too.

That was how the Doom War had ended.

With Weaver casting a Spell upon the Void from beyond the grave.

'...The Void?'

No… no, the Spell has not been cast upon the Void.

It had been cast upon the being who was slumbering in the Void, and was supposed to awaken and consume all of existence once the Gate of the Void was open.

Which it had been, even if Sunny still did not know who had opened them.

He let out a stifled laugh.

'Unbelievable.'

The Nightmare Spell… Sunny had never seriously considered why it was called that. Whose nightmare was it that had given the Spell its name?

He had simply assumed that it was the nightmare of everyone infected by it, or at least living in the world where Nightmare Creatures and the Spell run rampant and free.

But Sunny had been wrong.

In truth…

It was the nightmare of the Forgotten God.

The Nightmare Spell…

Was a lullaby.

It was a sorcery created to lull the God of Corruption back into slumber once someone — the Nine, perhaps — had opened the Void Gate and stirred him awake.

Why had existence not been destroyed when the Forgotten God was freed?

It was because after escaping the Void, he had been imprisoned somewhere else. He had been imprisoned in an endless nightmare.

The Forgotten God slumbered and saw dreams. The Seeds of

Nightmare, the Nightmare Gates, the Nightmare Creatures, the spreading Corruption… they were merely emanations of the nightmares he dreamed, slowly infecting what was left of the Flame.

'Wait… wait…'

Sunny's eyes widened.

The implications were too vast and enormous for him to handle easily.

The death of the gods, the end of the War… the purpose of the Spell? Weaver's hidden intent?

Sunny was not sure of his conclusions yet, but if he was right…

Then he could extrapolate and glimpse one final truth.

He had always assumed that the Sixth Nightmare — the Nightmare that would make those who conquered it Divine — was the last one.

But if the Spell had been cast to lull the Forgotten God to sleep, then there was one final Nightmare after that.

The Seventh Nightmare.

...Where the Forgotten God was imprisoned, dreaming restlessly.

The conflict the challengers of that dreadful Nightmare were meant to solve… was the conflict that plagued all of existence.

The fate of the Flame.

'I… I see now…'

The Spell kept the Forgotten God trapped within a Nightmare.

And at the same time, it ruthlessly nurtured mortals to become the new gods…

And kill him.

That was the truth of the dying world.

Sunny remained motionless for a long while, and then sighed deeply.

"Ah, that's… a little bit too ambitious, even for me…"

The Demon of Fate had promised to show him how to kill the gods.

But really, Weaver could have just as well promised to show him how to create gods.

That dastardly daemon…

"And what the hell did Weaver call me? Epigone? The nerve… bold words, coming from one-seventh of a deranged god!"

Sunny might have stumbled on the true purpose of Weaver's scheme... but that did not mean that he had to fulfill it.

After all, killing the Forgotten God was Weaver's goal... seemed to be Weaver's goal, at least. But it was not Sunny's goal, and neither was the goal of his comrades and companions. Of Nephis.

Their goal was simply to make sure that humanity survived and build a new home for it in the Dream Realm. They had to become gods to accomplish that, but battling the Forgotten God? While that would mean solving the root of the problem, it was also beyond what they wanted to accomplish.

They wanted to build a shelter from the storms, not eradicate the concept of storms from existence.

'Who could have thought that becoming a god would become a modest goal, one day?'

Sunny smiled darkly.

'To hell with Weaver.'

They were not marionettes that danced when a dead daemon pulled the strings. They would decide for themselves what they wanted to do, and what price they were willing to pay to achieve their goals.

At that moment, the mountain shuddered violently one last time, and

he felt himself being pushed out of the miniature realm of Ariel's Game.

The vast chamber of the Snow Palace disappeared, and for a moment, everything was dark. Or rather, everything was nothing and nowhere, beyond comprehension.

Then, Sunny saw a vaguely familiar ceiling above him.

And heard a very familiar voice.

"Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to show up!"

Sunny groaned, feeling countless points of view and several weeks of memories crashing into his mind.

…It was his own voice, of course.

Chapter-2413: Catching Up (With Myself)

Some time later, Sunny was in a magnificent council room of the Jade Palace — two of him, even. One was sitting on the Shadow Chair with his legs crossed, while the other was sprawled on a tastefully decadent couch, covering his face with a hand and groaning pitifully.

Both were nursing a mighty headache.

The incarnation on the chair was much better off than the other one, though. He was clean and neatly dressed, at least. His other self, the one who had just returned from a dreadful adventure in the realm of Ariel's Game, was covered in layers upon layers of ash, soot, dried blood, and dirt of all kinds. The hole in his chest barely healed, and the scar where his severed arm had been reattached was yet to disappear completely.

All in all, the sight of him was quite pathetic.

The first incarnation was a little disheveled too, though. That was because its body had gone through the agonizing process of inheriting the Flesh Weave as well — all of them had, really.

"That bastard…"

Sunny gave himself a venomous look and shook his head.

His other incarnation ignored him.

Of course, the two of them were really a single person — once again — so whatever pain one of them felt, the other felt as well. The headache they were suffering from had been caused by the process of several weeks of isolated memories merging together, in fact.

Still. If Sunny had an opportunity to appear composed and nonchalant while simultaneously throwing a tantrum and drowning in self-pity, he would be a fool to pass it up.

To his quiet dismay, the intended audience was ignoring his masterful performance completely.

Sunny sighed.

'What a waste of a good tantrum…'

Nephis was paying him little attention, busy tending to Kai's wounds. Even though Sunny was almost entirely healed… and even though he had caused the most severe of Kai's wounds himself… he was still unhappy with the lack of attention.

Granted, the rest of the people gathered in the council room were all looking at him intently. One could even say that they were giving him death stares.

To be fair… Seishan, Revel, and Hel had a reason to be unhappy with him.

Sunny coughed.

"What?"

[Do you have to ask?]

Even Cassie's voice was full of reproach.

All those days ago, when one of his incarnations and Kai had vanished suddenly from the Toy Room of the Jade Palace and left the startled Song sisters behind… three Nightmare Creatures took their place.

To be precise, a Cursed Tyrant and two Cursed Beasts took their place.

Sunny had already been moving his other incarnations toward Ravenheart, stunned by the sudden loss of connection to the naughty shadow, but he would have never made it to the Jade Palace in time.

The three Song sisters could have died right there and then.

But they didn't.

Of course, they would have never been able to defeat a Cursed Tyrant, let alone one commanding two Cursed Beasts. Luckily, the narrow confines of the Toy Room bought them a few moments to save themselves… and Seishan used those moments quite cunningly.

She lured the harrowing creatures toward the Jade Queen's dollhouse, which swallowed them up just like it had swallowed her and her sisters decades ago.

The Cursed Ones were still trapped inside of it. In fact, over the last two weeks, Sunny had spent many hours staring at the tiny figures of the abominable horrors wandering the beautifully decorated rooms of the Dollhouse.

Someone had to guard the two dreadful toys — the Dollhouse and the Jade Board — at all times, after all.

So, Sunny had spent the better half of the month doing just that. After a while, Nephis joined him as well… they did not know what would come out of the Jade Board next, so having this much power concentrated in Ravenheart was a necessity.

The missing incarnation remained lost, but it wasn't like they did not have any information about what it was doing at all.

In fact, they could see the figures move across the game board twice a day just fine. Sunny could also feel every excruciating moment of his soul receiving damage, and saw new shades entering his Soul Sea from time to time.

Powerful, dreadful shades…

Oh, and then the shadow of Condemnation went and vanished entirely.

...His dastardly avatar seemed to be having great fun, out there all by himself.

All of this culminated in Kai stumbling into the Toy Room out of thin air. Before Sunny could let out a sigh of relief, though, he found himself in utter agony, feeling his flesh rebuild and rearrange itself.

And as soon as he recovered, the prodigal incarnation returned, flooding his mind with the memories of vicious battles, startling revelations, and truths so shocking that he was almost sent into a catatonic state.

Luckily, he also regained memories of somewhat coming to terms with this new knowledge — initially, at least — so that episode did not last long.

Sunny glanced at Nephis, then answered Cassie's mental question.

[I don't have to ask, but come on. They weren't even maimed that badly. How long do I have to spend in the dog house?]

Whatever wounds the Song sisters had received were almost instantaneously healed by Nephis from a vast distance — that, too, was a reason they were alive and well.

Sunny might have been a little reckless, but could he really be blamed? If Seishan had not told him about visiting the Toy Room many times as a kid and returning alive and more or less unscathed each time, he would have exercised more caution.

Why would a Sovereign be extra careful in a place where literal children used to play?

Kai was fully healed by now, so Nephis left him and walked over to the head of the table. Sitting down, she studied Sunny for a while — both of them in turn — and opened her mouth to speak.

Before she could, however, Death Singer spoke first:

"Look, look! There's two of them. Changing Star, can I have one? Please? Pretty please?"

Nephis closed her mouth and stared at her silently.

Her face remained expressionless…

But the curtains behind Death Singer seemed to have suddenly caught on fire, for some reason.

"Ouch!"

Death Singer shook embers out of her hair and gave Nephis a sorrowful glare.

"Greedy!"

Nephis stared at her for a few more seconds, then took a deep breath, extinguished the curtains with a thought, and looked back to Sunny.

"So? What exactly happened?"

He smiled awkwardly.

"Well… do you want the short version or the long version?"

Nephis shrugged.

"Let's start with a short summary."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Okay. Let's see…"

Chapter-2414: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless and his Dashing Best Friend Nightingale, Abridged (Volume IX)

Sunny leaned back in his chair.

He had a story to tell... and after having suffered through the story personally, he was going to enjoy himself telling it.

He started off in a solemn tone:

"A long time ago, the Demon of Fate and the Demon of Dread played a game. Only, being crazy bastards, they played with Great and Cursed Nightmare Creatures instead of game pieces. And — what would you know? — Kai and I got sucked into the Death Game realm and were given a choice between winning an unwinnable game or meeting our deaths. So, we went and won."

Nephis sighed.

"...A little bit less short, please."

Seishan, meanwhile, looked between them with a stunned expression.

"Excuse me? Demon of Fate, Demon of Dread? Cursed Nightmare Creatures?"

Sunny grinned.

"You're excused. Anyway, where do I begin? First, we eradicated a swarm of one hundred Great Beasts. Then, we graduated to fighting Cursed abominations. The first one we killed was an infinite worm… and I mean literally infinite. That thing seemed like trouble, but actually, it died when I simply stepped on it…"

Revel stared at him for a few moments, then turned to Kai.

Kai waved a hand weakly, still exhausted from the ordeal.

His voice was faint:

"It's true… it's all true…"

Her eyes widened.

"No, but…"

However, Sunny interrupted her.

"So, next we found a cozy temple on the peak of a mystical mountain and waited to be beset by a pack of dreadful wolves led by a Cursed Demon, as well as a very impressive training dummy. I was really hungry by then, but sadly, there was no wolf meat left by the time I was done with them. In fact, there was barely any mountain left as well. I sort of blew it up to smithereens… it was quite a sight."

Nephis shifted slightly and gave him a strange look.

"You… blew up a mountain?"

Sunny raised his chin.

"Sure did!"

He thought she would be proud of him, but for some reason, her gaze seemed a little dejected.

If Sunny did not know any better, he would have thought that Nephis was… pouting?

But that was impossible, of course. After all, she was Changing Star,

the last daughter of the Immortal Flame. The fearless Sovereign of Humanity. Surely, she would not mind him stealing her signature move?

'Right. No way!'

Sunny cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Well, in any case. Next, we killed another Cursed Demon and two Cursed Monsters. How? To be honest, I don't actually remember, but it must have been in quite a spectacular fashion."

Death Singer looked at him, then at the other him laying on the couch with a miserable expression on his grimy… but unmistakably dashing… face.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… wait a minute? How can you not remember slaying a Cursed Demon and two Cursed Monsters, though?"

Those were Cursed Nightmare Creatures they were talking about! Actual deities!

Sunny gave her his most sincere, innocent smile and shrugged nonchalantly.

"It must have slipped my mind."

There was silence in the room for a while.

Eventually, everyone turned to look at Kai in unison.

Exposed to their gazes, Kai smiled awkwardly.

"Oh… actually, I don't remember either…"

Nephis and the Song sisters seemed deeply betrayed by that statement.

Their reproachful gazes were obviously saying…

You too, Nightingale?

You too?

Kai coughed and looked away in embarrassment.

Sunny chuckled.

"After that, though, something incredible happened!"

Four gazes turned to him once again. He paused for a few moments, and continued in a happy tone:

"We finally procured a meal! Well, at least I did. There was this Cursed Beast, you see — an endless swarm of rats… and I mean literally endless. Turns out, a cursed rat roasted over lava is simply delicious. Blighted, diseased, and poisonous, but nonetheless piquant and delectable. I positively stuffed myself, and can you blame me?"

Death Singer paled a little and moved away from the incarnation on the couch. Her mumble was almost inaudible, but it still made Nephis let out a long sigh.

"...On second thought, you can have that one, Changing Star. He's all yours!"

Then, she looked at the incarnation on the chair and batted her eyelashes.

Sunny wisely pretended not to notice.

"Now that I had a full stomach, it was finally time to take on the Cursed Tyrant! The Cursed Tyrant was an acquaintance of an acquaintance, as it turned out — quite a pleasant fellow, really. We had a nice chat…"

This time, it was Cassie's who interrupted him.

[You… you chatted… with a Cursed Tyrant?]

Her voice seemed to tremble a little as it resounded in his head.

Sunny smiled.

"Indeed, I did. We discussed refined topics like philosophy, theology, and peaceful resolution of violent conflicts. Sadly, our enlightened debate reached an impasse… so I cut off the Cursed Tyrant's head."

He sighed and looked into the distance thoughtfully.

"That, I find, is a surefire way to win an argument."

The council room was filled with a stunned, incredulous silence for a long time.

Sunny did not hurry to say anything else, either.

At least for a while.

Then, he looked at his audience and smiled again.

"And here I am!"

He scratched the tip of his nose.

"Well, technically, I've been here all along. But you know what I mean."

His smile widened.

Nephis stared at him for some time, then rubbed her temples.

"Yes… here you are."

She hesitated for a moment, then glanced at Kai.

"Did he forget to mention anything?"

Kai considered the question seriously.

"I don't think so? Well, I guess… there was also that dragon…"

Nephis suddenly stood up, interrupting him.

"Actually, never mind. Let's continue this conversation later, shall we? Better yet… forget I asked."

Her gaze softened.

"You two must be terribly tired. Go wash off the grime of battle, eat a proper meal, and rest. There will be plenty of time tomorrow."

Kai nodded in gratitude and rose to leave. Sunny stood up, as well.

"If you'll excuse me, then."

Both of his incarnations headed for the door.

The one covered in soot was let go, but the other one… someone suddenly caught him by the collar.

Turning around, Sunny was met by Neph's heated gaze.

"Not you. You stay here… if you will. I have a few questions to ask…"

[Yes. I have a few questions to ask, too.]

Cassie's voice had an edge to it now.

Sunny forced out a pleasant smile.

"Why, of course…"

Something was telling him that he was in for a long, restless night.

At the same time, he found himself in a strange predicament.

The events that had transpired in the world at large in these last few weeks were old news for him, but at the same time, he just learned about them.

So, Sunny found himself in a strange state of being surprised and stunned by something he already knew.

'Rain... did what?!'

The incarnation who had just left the council room paused for a moment and covered its face with a palm.

Chapter-2415: Huge, Huge Trouble

"Everyone on the floor! This is a robbery!"

There was gunfire, screams, and the sound of breaking furniture as a group of masked men burst into the foyer of a prestigious bank. The startled clients froze, paralyzed by shock and fear; the workers raised their trembling hands into the air.

The Awakened security guards lunged forward while summoning their Memories, but a few moments later, they were already sprawled on the ground, groaning or unconscious.

…June should have known that his first mission as a member of the Shadow Clan would go terribly wrong.

'Ah. I hate amateurs...'

He had spent close to a month in the peaceful silence of the Dark City, being trained by the graceful stone Devil, learning how to use the Mark of Shadows, and establishing bonds with other members of the Shadow Clan. Usually, a new recruit would have been given more time to adjust to their role and get used to things, but June was in somewhat of a unique position.

His status as an elite among the black market operatives gave him a perfect cover to be seen in places where other members of the Shadow Clan could not enter without drawing attention, as well a convenient reason to meddle in all kinds of unsavory business.

So, he had been sent on a mission earlier than usual…

And now, he found himself in the middle of a bank robbery.

To be precise, June was wearing black combat fatigues, hiding his face behind a Nightmare Creature mask, and holding an automatic rifle while watching his fellow robbers herd the hostages to the center of the foyer. Others were breaking into the security system of the bank to activate the lockdown protocol — having made sure that everyone was proceeding smoothly, he turned to the person who had fired a burst of bullets into the ceiling and regarded him coldly.

The man sensed his gaze and turned, asking in a hoarse voice:

"What?"

Instead of answering, June silently punched him in the solar plexus. His jab had not been telegraphed in any way and lacked a wind-up, so it did not seem very forceful… and yet, the Awakened henchman folded in two and fell to his knees with a pained gasp, struggling to breathe.

June calmly grabbed him by the hair, jerked his head upward, and asked in a chillingly calm tone:

"What are you doing?"

He pointed to the ceiling.

"Have you watched too many movies, moron? This bank is built to withstand Nightmare Gates. It is a box made from monster hide and reinforced alloy, so where do you think your bullets go when you start shooting randomly? Do you want to kill someone with a ricochet?"

The man hissed, trying to struggle free from his grasp, and looked up at June with fury.

However, that fury was replaced with fear after meeting his cold, murderous, and eerily calm gaze.

The enforcer shivered behind the snarling mask.

"...S—sorry, Corsair."

June watched him for a moment more, mentally reevaluating the

situation.

The people who had reached out to hire him for this job were not his usual clientele. They were not professionals assembling a crew of reliable specialists — instead, they were zealots.

Usually, June would not have taken such a contract, but the strange cult these zealots belonged to had been on the Shadow Clan's radar for a number of months now. This was their first serious move, so Awakened Kim had sent him to learn more about their goals and to make sure that nothing went wrong during the attack on the bank.

In short, the robbers were a motley crew of a dozen or so believers and a few hired hands — June included. He was one of the more experienced people among them, so even the zealots seemed to be treating him with respect and trepidation.

Still… perhaps it was a good idea to make them respect him a little more.

June looked at the kneeling enforcer, considering if it was worth it to make an example out of him.

"Is there a problem here?"

He shifted his gaze and looked at a delicate young woman with fair skin and blonde hair who had approached them. She was the only one of them dressed as a civilian and wearing no mask — granted, she did change the color of her hair and the features of her face with a camouflage charm.

She had been hiding among the clients of the bank when the attack began, looking weak and inconspicuous. That was why the guards had not paid the delicate young woman any attention and were taken down by her in a matter of seconds as a result. Now that they were expertly tied up and under watch, she approached June.

The young woman was another specialist hired by the zealots.

…She was also his fellow Shadow, Fleur.

Ray was also here, posing as a mundane person and being restrained

alongside other hostages. The three of them were sent on this mission together, with June taking charge.

However, they were not supposed to show any sign that they knew each other prior to being hired to rob the bank. Fleur had to stay away from him to avoid drawing attention… June knew her well enough by now to know how competent she was despite being quite young, so there had to be a reason why she had gone against his instructions.

Something was wrong.

Letting go of the kneeling henchman, he wiped his hand on his fatigues and gave her a frigid look.

"No problem whatsoever. We were just having a friendly chat."

Using the opportunity, the henchman scrambled away. Fleur studied June for a moment more, then nodded and turned away.

Her delicate fingers, though, moved to form subtle signs. June looked the other way, paying no attention to them.

He did, however, sense the signs formed by the shadow of her fingers on the floor.

[We are in huge, huge trouble.]

Maintaining a nonchalant attitude, he tensed inwardly.

[Look right.]

June did just that.

The hostages were divided into two groups. The larger group consisted of mundane humans — Ray was among them, sitting on the floor with his hands tied behind his back. Despite being amateurs in June's eyes, the robbers were not, in fact, hapless. They had reliable means of identifying Awakened, it was just that Ray's Aspect made most of such means useless.

The smaller group, consisting of only a handful of people, was

isolated to June's right. He looked at them, immediately noticing two stunning young women — both handcuffed with special enchanted cuffs.

His attention was not focused on them because of their beauty, of course, but rather because both seemed much too calm for the situation they were in... which was not at all a good sign.

June frowned, feeling a very bad premonition.

One girl was of medium height, with tan skin and ashen hair, looking at the world with the imperious, cold gaze of a Legacy scion. The other looked much more approachable… beguiling, even… looking around with lively curiosity in her gemlike onyx eyes and a slight smile playing on her soft lips.

It was that easy, captivating smile that made it hard to look away from her.

Well, that and the fact that she looked vaguely familiar.

No, not just vaguely.

Fair skin, raven-black hair... the girl strongly reminded June of someone he knew all too well.

His mouth was suddenly dry.

"Don't tell me…"

Fleur gave him another signal.

[Yes… that is the Princess of Shadows, Rain. Boss's little sister.]

June closed his eyes for a moment, remembering every curse word he knew.

'You gotta be kidding me…'

He was so screwed!

Chapter-2416: Can of Worms

The assailants moved swiftly. Before too long, the bank's security system was in their hands, and the heavy armor plates meant to protect the building in case a Nightmare Gate opened nearby fell down, turning it into an impregnable — an inescapable — fortress.

Of course, all things were relative. Nothing was truly impregnable in the world of the Nightmare Spell — the bank could withstand the attacks of Awakened abominations, and maybe a few Fallen ones as well, but far more terrifying creatures were entering the waking world more and more frequently these days.

What seemed like reliable security measures just a few years ago were swiftly falling behind and becoming obsolete.

The robbers were not really worried about Fallen and Corrupted abominations, either. What threatened them more were humans — government forces would arrive at the scene soon enough, including powerful Ascended officers. If their luck was especially bad, even a Saint could show up to resolve the crisis.

The chances of encountering someone they had no business encountering were especially high because this bank was an old and prestigious one, having existed from before the descent of the Spell. Many prominent families, including storied Legacy clans, used its vault to store precious heirlooms and priceless treasures — a concerned powerhouse could appear out of the blue not out of a sense of duty or altruism, but simply to prevent their own family from being robbed.

'Ah… it's getting worse and worse.'

June sighed quietly.

The presence of hostages would buy the robbers some time… but not

enough time. They had to finish the job swiftly and get away before things went south.

By now, the mundane clients and workers were tied up and sitting on the floor near the east wall of the foyer, while the Awakened visitors and security guards were restrained and kept under watch near the west wall.

Among them was the mysterious Princess of the Shadow Clan.

June threw a dark look at the beautiful young woman and groaned inwardly.

'Blast it.'

On the day he joined the Shadow Clan, Awakened Kim warned him about three people — her husband, Aiko, and the Princess. He had become good pals with Luster in no time and built rapport with the Shadow Fairy in no time. However, June had sworn to stay as far away from Boss's little sister as possible.

He did not need to open that particular can of worms.

And now here she was, in front of him.

…Locked, restrained, taken hostage, and surrounded by militant zealots.

What was going to happen to June if even a single hair fell from her head?

'What was it that Awakened Kim said?'

When it came to their Boss, being killed was not an escape from suffering... it was merely the beginning.

June had remained calm in many situations that would have made most Awakened faint. He had survived horrors beyond imagination and looked Death in the eye without flinching on countless occasions.

But now, he suddenly felt nervous.

Forming subtle signs with his fingers, he sent Fleur a message:

[We must make sure that absolutely no harm comes to her.]

Fleur did not answer for a few moments.

And when she did, there was something strange about her response.

[Harm... comes to her? No, Corsair. You don't understand.]

She turned slightly and gave him an odd look.

[You should be concerned about the zealots, instead. We must make sure that Rain doesn't take them all out before we can complete our mission.]

Deciphering the ominous message, June raised an eyebrow behind his mask.

[Why? Is there a possibility that she'll go on some kind of massacre?]

Fleur stared at him with an incredulous expression for a brief moment, then looked away.

[Don't be silly. She's a pacifist.]

Now, what the hell was that supposed to mean?

June would have loved to learn more, but at that moment, a man wearing a Tyrant mask walked into the empty space between the two groups of hostages. His low voice resounded in the foyer of the bank, making a few of them flinch:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Tyrant. You have the honor of being my guests tonight — show proper manners, and you'll have a pleasant visit. If not…"

His chilling gaze landed on the hostages, forcing a few to reel back.

"I am afraid you won't enjoy the consequences. My people won't enjoy washing blood and viscera off our clothes, either, so do consider acting with decorum and following our instructions

faithfully. Don't give me a reason to revoke my hospitality."

The man was the leader of the group — a figure of prominence in the cult and a seasoned warrior, at least judging by what June had discerned about him. Worst of all, he was a Master.

June had taken down a Master or two in the past, but it was never easy — especially when he did not have the advantage of striking from stealth or luring the enemy into an ambush. Assassinating an Ascended was one thing, but facing one in an honest battle was not something he ever wished to repeat.

He just hoped that the Princess would not draw the Tyrant's attention. Nothing good would come if she did…

As June was somberly contemplating contingencies, the dead silence that followed the Tyrant's address was suddenly broken by a loud whisper.

"Wow. Tamar, did you hear that? That was a proper villain's speech, wasn't it? So cool! That guy is too full of himself, but let's give credit where credit is due — he's really eloquent… for a pompous dimwit, I mean…"

"Rain... can you shut up? Please."

"Do you think he gave that speech impromptu, or had he rehearsed it at home? If it's the former, amazing! Great improvisational skills. I sort of think that it's the latter, though. Can you imagine? That'd be so funny… him standing in front of a mirror, practicing a sinister voice…"

"Stop talking, fool. I'm begging you."

"No, I'm just saying… do villains like that utter buffoon over there also get stage fright? I'd be mortified, having to give a speech in front of a hostile crowd. He has guts, that's for sure!"

"Ah. You've done did it now..."

"Huh? Why is everyone looking at me?"

The loud whispers finally grew silent.

Everyone in the bank — the robbers, the hostages, and the Tyrant himself — were indeed staring at the two young women.

The Princess of Shadow blinked a couple of times, then smiled awkwardly.

"Oh, was I too loud? Sorry, sorry. Uh… continue as you were!"

June trembled and suppressed the desire to shoot someone… maybe himself?

In all his career as a soldier, mercenary, and occasionally an assassin…

'Argh! She's exactly like her brother!'

Chapter-2417: Harmless, Hilarious Hostage

Rain looked at the masked thugs and smiled innocently.

'That should be enough, right?'

Life was really unpredictable. Today was supposed to be a usual day, and yet, she had found herself in the middle of a bank robbery. Rain would have blamed her terrible luck, but she suspected that luck had nothing to do with it… rather, it must have been Tamar.

She gave the Legacy girl a sidelong glance.

The two of them were visiting NQSC on business — well, Rain was, while Tamar had come along as her friend and unofficial bodyguard.

Chief Bethany had achieved a groundbreaking feat by establishing a hydroelectric plant in the Dream Realm, but she could not return to the waking world to share her research with the part of the academic community still residing here. If she did, she would be pulled into the First Nightmare — so, an intermediary was needed to make a report on her behalf.

Rain was the only Awakened on the team, so she was a natural choice despite being an intern. She had been wanting to visit NQSC for the longest time, as well. This was where she had grown up, after all, but after leaving the city for Ravenheart many years ago, she never had the opportunity to return.

So, Rain and Tamar used the Dream Gate to come back to the waking world. The conference where she was supposed to make the report was supposed to start in a few hours, but before they went to the venue, Tamar asked to visit the bank where her clan had a deposit box.

And here they were, restrained and being stared down by a dozen armed assailants.

Said assailants were staring at Rain with overflowing malice right now.

"Oh, was I too loud? Sorry, sorry. Uh… continue as you were."

She looked at the leader of the bandits awkwardly.

…Of course, she had not just offended him for fun.

Rain might have been young, but she knew people well. She had met all kinds of men and women — many of them at their worst or at their best. Crisis and war had a way of drawing out one's true nature, and both were plentiful in the world of the Nightmare Spell.

So, having swiftly glimpsed the Tyrant's true nature, she knew where things would go from the moment he started to speak.

The callous man needed to make a crowd of frightened people submit to him — it was an imperative necessity if he wanted to emerge from this conflict with minimal losses. But frightened people were rarely rational… mere threats were not going to work.

If he knew what he was doing, and he seemed like someone who did, he would illustrate his promise of violence with something more convincing than words. She was certain that the Tyrant was going to make an example out of someone, even if no one challenged his authority immediately… their blood would prove his point and make the rest of the hostages believe his threats.

That was why Rain had provoked the man. If someone had to be made an example of, it would be much better for her to play that role — Rain was an Awakened, after all, and could endure much more punishment than one of the mundane hostages would.

And if the Tyrant went too far, she and Tamar could offer far more resistance.

She was not arrogant enough to think that the two of them were invincible. In fact, in other circumstances, Rain might have acted

with more caution…

But she had noticed Ray among the hostages. Fleur was here, too, having infiltrated the criminal crew — their disguises did not fool Rain, and after sensing them communicating with the shadow signs, she concluded that the tall man in the mask of a hideous Devil was a member of the Shadow Clan, as well.

The mysterious Devil emanated a sense of confidence and chilling composure. She could not see his face, but his piercing blue eyes were cold and indifferent, as if he was not at all disturbed by the tense and potentially deadly situation. He seemed like a man with ice flowing through his veins.

Rain did not know him, and he did not seem to recognize her either, so he was probably someone Sunny had recruited recently.

Collecting unique people seemed to be his latest hobby…

In any case, there were five members of Shadow Clan in the bank and ten assailants — meaning that while Rain was indeed putting herself in danger, that danger was not too serious.

Five Shadows was more than enough to handle this rabble. The only problem was the Tyrant himself, who seemed to be a Master… however, the magnitude of that problem remained to be seen.

As the callous man turned his glassy gaze to her, Rain smiled and whispered two words almost inaudibly to assign herself a pair of Epithets.

"I am Harmless, Hilarious Promise of a Distant Sky."

People were less likely to attack those they were not threatened by, and far more likely to treat those who made them laugh well.

Now, she could only hope that the Tyrant would not decide to go too hard on her.

He studied her for a few moments, then approached her with slow, measured steps and stared her down, making her shiver.

Something was lacking from the man's gaze… empathy, perhaps, or maybe even humanity.

'Ah, I hope it won't hurt too much.'

But as long as the other hostages were spared, Rain was alright with hurting a little.

To her relief, however, the Tyrant suddenly let out a low, unnerving chuckle.

"Why, thank you, young lady. Eloquence is indeed something a man in my line of work needs to excel at."

With that, he shifted his glassy gaze to Tamar.

The Tyrant remained silent for a moment, and then spoke in an even tone:

"Tamar of Sorrow… what a pleasant surprise."

Legacies were no different from celebrities, so it was no surprise that he recognized her — even if Clan Sorrow had lost its former prominence, many people would know what she looked like.

The Tyrant seemed to smile behind his mask, and then spoke over his shoulder in an emotionless voice:

"Corsair, take these young ladies down with us. It will be easier to get into the vault with them around."

Rain let out a tiny sigh of relief and threw a glance at the tall man in the Devil mask, Corsair.

The newest member of the Shadow Clan was looking her way, as well.

'Huh…'

But why… did it seem like he wanted to strangle her?

Chapter-2418: VIPs

The assailants moved with speed and discipline one would expect from well-trained soldiers, not thugs who would go around robbing banks. Before Rain could even come to terms with the shifting situation, she and Tamar were being escorted into the depths of the building.

The Tyrant was leading the way, with six of his men following. The two hostages were walking behind, with Corsair and Fleur guarding them.

Which meant that four Awakened bandits stayed behind to guard the rest of the hostages, and were now alone with Ray.

'Can we take them down?'

Rain and Tamar were restrained with enchanted cuffs that made their essence strangely sluggish and prevented them from summoning any Memories. The former would have interfered with their ability to use Aspect Abilities… if not for the Mark of Shadows.

Every member of the Shadow Clan was a master at controlling essence due to bearing the Mark and undergoing extensive training — so, they were all but immune to the insidious influence of the enchanted restraints.

Rain had dismissed the Epithets she had assigned herself to avoid the Tyrant's wrath, and was now considering her next steps.

First…

She looked at the rifles the assailants were carrying.

It was strange to see Awakened using contemporary weapons instead of Memories. Sure, while it was difficult to seriously harm a Master

with a bullet, Awakened themselves were far more susceptible to modern firearms. In fact, it was only marginally harder to kill them with a high-powered shot than it would be a mundane human.

So, the rifles posed quite a real threat to Rain, Tamar, and the other Shadows.

Still, perhaps because she had spent so many years in the Dream Realm, seeing Awakened carrying modern weapons felt very strange. More than that, Memories were simply a better choice — not only because they were deadlier, more powerful, and could possess potent enchantments, but also because they were far easier to carry and conceal.

Rain signed a question:

[Why are you armed that way?]

It was Corsair who answered, hinting that he was in charge of this mission.

[Memories are unique, so they are easier to identify and trace. Anonymity is key in these matters.]

She considered his words for a moment. That was an unexpected, but logical perspective.

But the readiness of his response was a little strange.

[You seem to know a lot about this stuff. Robbed many banks recently?]

Corsair answered calmly… it was a weird thing, but after practicing for a while, one could discern tone and emotion in the movement of the other person's shadow when communicating with shadow signs. Fleur, for example, signed softly and smoothly.

The new recruit, on the other hand, signed precisely and mechanically, with the measured indifference of a finely tuned machine.

[...Not many.]

Rain and Tamar glanced at each other.

Where, exactly, had her brother found this guy?

He was... sort of cool.

'Wait, did he really rob a bank before?'

Come to think of it, there had indeed been a similar mission in the works...

The assailants were descending into the basement of the bank, with one of them swiftly unlocking the armored doors that stood in their way from a handheld console. They seemed well-prepared for the job, even if locking themselves in a bank with the government forces guaranteed to arrive and surround the building swiftly was pure madness.

Rain signed another question:

[What is their plan, exactly?]

Corsair answered after a short pause.

[We were not told the details. One of them has a spatial movement Aspect Ability, though. He is their escape route.]

'...Wait, he must be really new. How come he uses shadow signs so confidently, then?'

It took her ages to learn this strange manner of communication. Was this guy a genius?

That was so unfair!

Rain suppressed her envy and asked the final question:

[So, what do we do? Shall we take them down?]

Corsair shifted slightly, and she could feel his cold gaze.

[Please don't do anything yet, Princess. At least not until they reveal all their cards.]

Rain frowned. It was reasonable to assume that the Tyrant had an ace or two up his sleeve, but...

[What if they hurt the hostages?]

His response was curt.

[They won't.]

She had no choice but to believe him.

'So…'

Corsair, Fleur, and Ray were here to spy on the assailants and learn something about them, then take them down. Which meant that these were not simple criminals.

Rain wanted to scratch her head, but sadly, her hands were restrained.

Who, then? Misguided loyalists refusing to accept the fall of the Valor and Song regime? Disciples of some strange doomsday cult?

Several of those had sprouted out of nowhere after Sister-In-Law made her explosive announcement…

Finally, they reached the vault. This one, the Tyrant's tech specialist could not unlock — so, the leader of the assailants invited Tamar forward, gesturing to the complicated lock.

"If you will, Lady Tamar."

She stared at him coldly for a few moments, then nodded to the lowest part of the contraption.

"Am I supposed to scan my fingerprints while my hands are tied behind my back?"

Her clan had a deposit box in the vault, so her data would be stored in the bank VIP client repository — that alone would probably not unlock the door, but it would help the tech specialist deceive the system.

The robbers studied her silently. Finally, the Tyrant pushed one of them forward.

"Take the cuffs off."

Then, he turned his glassy gaze back to Tamar.

"Please don't do anything rash, young lady. If you do, I'll start with cutting off a finger. I know that you won't be deterred by such a simple threat — Legacies can be quite stubborn, after all — but do understand that I don't mean your finger. I mean your little friend over there… and it won't end with a single finger, either."

Rain instinctively clenched her fists, hiding her fingers. Tamar remained nonchalant, staring at the Tyrant darkly, while Corsair tilted his head a little.

'Poor Tyrant... he doesn't know what's coming for him.'

Rain almost pitied the man.

The cuffs came off.

Tamar walked over to the lock and unhurriedly scanned her retinas and fingerprints. Lastly, she channeled a little bit of her essence into a special spelltech pattern that lit up, recognizing it.

Soon, the heavy door let out a series of low clicks and opened slowly…

Far above, in the foyer of the bank, Ray was sitting on the floor among the frightened hostages. His hands were zip-tied behind his back, and there was an appropriately scared expression on his face.

His eyes, however, hid a hint of boredom.

The four robbers were watching the hostages like hawks, but no one seemed to be paying him much attention.

Ray remained motionless. But…

Unnoticed by anyone, a black snake slowly slithered out of his sleeve.

The snake coiled on the floor, then raised its triangular head.

Its fangs bit into the zip tie, easily slicing it apart.

Ray brought his hands forward and rubbed his wrists.

Then, he reached back and picked up the snake gently. A moment later, its body rippled and turned into a razor-sharp black blade.

Still ignored by everyone, Ray inhaled deeply and slowly rose from the ground.

Chapter-2419: Bank Vault

Deep in the bowels of the heavily fortified bank, the massive doors of the vault opened, and the Tyrant led his men inside. Rain and Tamar were forced to follow, as well, finding themselves in a…

'Huh?'

The bank vault… looked nothing like what Rain had expected.

In fact, it looked no different from a tastefully decorated, luxurious apartment. There was a spacious guest room with lavish furniture, video walls showing a scenic seaside landscape, and a sophisticated climate control system that imitated an invigorating breeze.

Several doors led out of the guest room, opening into a beautifully furnished kitchen, a neat and cozy bedroom, a recreation room with a state-of-the-art entertainment system, a stylish parlour… there was everything a person needed to live a comfortable life here, not having to step outside at all.

A woman in a muted, but fashionable business attire was standing in the middle of the guest room, looking at the Tyrant with a tense expression.

'What is going on?'

Rain glanced at Tamar and Corsair furtively, but neither of them seemed surprised by the scene.

The Tyrant gave a nod, and his people dispersed across the luxurious vault… apartment? Vault?

The man himself, meanwhile, walked over to the woman and gave her his usual cold, glassy stare.

He spoke first:

"Pleasure to meet you, vault keeper. Now… I presume there is no point in expecting your willing cooperation?"

The woman shook her head somberly.

The Tyrant chuckled.

"Suit yourself. Torture it is, then."

She gave him a cold smile.

"You seem to know your basics. Then you should know that people like me are employed for a reason, as well. My Aspect makes me immune to pain, so… try your worst."

Rain finally understood what was happening. In hindsight, it was quite obvious.

This bank was an old and prestigious one, offering its services to many prominent Legacy families. And what was it that Legacy clans would want to keep safe?

Jewelry, precious materials, pieces of priceless art?

Well, that too. But primarily, the most valuable assets Legacies possessed… were Memories and Echoes.

Only Awakened could own those, though. In case the heirs of a family had not undergone the Awakening yet, a reliable intermediary was needed to make sure that they would receive their inheritance — Awakened led dangerous lives, after all, and could die at any moment. Parents were not always able to transfer the Aspect Legacy relics and valuable Memories to their children themselves.

Adult Legacies were most likely in the habit of entrusting the heirlooms of their clan to a reliable, neutral party for safekeeping, especially before embarking on a life-threatening journey… like challenging a Nightmare or participating in a war, for example.

Hence the need for the bank, and for the woman who was standing in

front of the Tyrant with a cold smile.

He had called her the vault keeper… but more precisely, she was the vault.

She was the Awakened who kept the Memories and Echoes entrusted to the bank in her soul. That was why she was locked underground, living in the safety of this luxurious, heavily protected apartment.

And just in case someone invaded the underground safe room, the Vault Keeper possessed an Aspect that negated pain — and was therefore immune to more mundane forms of torture, making it that much harder to force her to transfer the Memories and Echoes against her will.

But… where there was a will, there was a way.

Rain's expression darkened.

There was probably an armored room with mundane deposit boxes somewhere here, as well, but that was not the Tyrant's goal.

His goal was the Vault Keeper.

The man studied her silently for a moment, and then seemed to smile behind his mask.

"Bold words, but will you be responsible for them? We will see just how potent your Aspect is soon, Vault Keeper. Are you truly immune to all pain? Does that encompass all physical pain, or do you not feel the agony of having your soul torn apart, either? What about fear? Do you not fear watching yourself be maimed and disfigured, even while not feeling anything?"

She pursed her lips, but remained silent, looking at him with a pale face.

'Yeah… no. I don't know what Corsair's mission is, but I am not going to watch an innocent woman be tortured right in front of my eyes.'

At that moment, the Tyrant chuckled again.

"Well, no matter. As much as I'd love to test your limits, insolent fool, there is no time for that. So, let me introduce you to my friend."

Suddenly, a whirlwind of radiant sparks surrounded him. The whirlwind was too large to manifest into a Memory, which meant…

'An Echo?'

Suddenly, there was a sound of claws scraping against the floor.

A hideous creature appeared in the spacious room, towering above the humans. It was about three meters tall, with a gaunt torso and long, pale limbs. Its lower limbs were long and powerful, resembling that of a frog, while its upper limbs looked almost like that of a human — apart from their deathly pallor, eerie proportions, and clawed hands.

The truly appalling part was its face, though.

'Ugh. Disgusting.'

A mess of slithering tentacles hung from the creature's mouth, obscuring its chest. Its eyes were large and milky-white, covered by cataracts, and there were fin-like ridges crowning its head. The whole thing was moist and glistening dimly, as if the creature had just crawled from a dark pool of stagnant water.

From what Rain could tell, it was an Echo of a Fallen Devil.

The Vault Keeper took an involuntary step back, while Corsair took a lazy step forward... which just so happened to put him between Rain and the Echo.

Coincidentally, he almost bumped shoulders with Tamar, who had done the same.

"What… what is this thing?"

The Vault Keeper's voice was grim.

The Tyrant craned his neck to look at his Echo, and then turned back to the woman.

"This is a uniquely persuasive Echo. Its powers affect the mind… sadly, they also physically destroy the brain of the victim — but only after getting the victim to do what the master of the Echo needs. So, Vault Keeper, you have a choice. You can either get to know my friend better, or hand over a Memory called the Key of Ascension voluntarily."

Rain lowered her head and prepared to manifest her Mark into a weapon.

At that moment, however, something unexpected happened.

Just as lazily as he had come between her and the Echo, Corsair took another step forward…

And plunged a black stiletto into the back of the Tyrant's skull.

...Or rather, tried to.

Strangely enough, the sharp blade simply slid off the man's head, only leaving a shallow scratch on it.

Time seemed to slow down for a moment.

'No… what the hell? Time has literally slowed down!'

Corsair sighed.

"Ray, now!"

And then, everything around them was suddenly plunged into darkness.

Chapter-2420: Uncharted Territory

A few minutes earlier, Ray rose from the floor and studied the four Awakened robbers guarding the hostages. His Dormant Aspect Ability did not make him invisible, but it did make him hard to notice — people and Nightmare Creatures both paid him little attention, and his presence was very subtle.

Still, there was a limit to that Ability. He could take one of the bandits down, but unless he was careful, the rest would immediately notice it. Even if they did not notice Ray himself, they would see one of their own going down — his targets, after all, did not possess the same power.

'Four of them…'

Awakened were unpredictable and often possessed tricky Aspects, but usually, taking down four would not pose a problem to Ray — not after the training he had received in the Shadow Clan, at least. Taking them down quietly and while making sure that no hostage was harmed, however, was a different matter.

He looked at the black blade in his hand, then sighed and placed it on the ground.

A moment later, Ray was gone.

In moments like these, his best friend... was a distraction.

Nothing happened for a dozen seconds, and then, one of the hostages suddenly reeled back and screamed:

"S—snake! Snake!"

The four robbers simultaneously turned to the source of the disturbance, aiming their rifles up. The man was awkwardly trying to crawl back, even though there was nothing in front of him.

The robbers glanced at each other and then headed toward him.

Well… three of them did, at least.

The one furthest away from the shouting hostage, and therefore behind the line of sight of his allies, suddenly found an arm wrapping around his neck.

Ray got the man in a chokehold and squeezed with vicious strength, putting him to sleep. Since he made no noise whatsoever, and everyone's attention was focused on the frightened hostage, no one noticed him gently laying the unconscious robber on the floor.

The other three, meanwhile, reached their destination. They looked at the pale hostage, and then, one of them said in an angry tone:

"Shut the hell up, moron. There's nothing here!"

The hostage, however, shook his head.

"N—no! There was a snake here just a moment ago! I swear!"

The robber sighed and opened his mouth to curse at the tied-up man.

It was then that a black snake suddenly slithered up his body and wrapped itself around his neck. Its mouth opened, and a chilling hiss resounded in the foyer.

"What the…"

The other robbers were starting to raise their rifles, but just then, Ray appeared near one of them, bringing down an alloy stanchion — which he had scavenged nearby — onto his head. The man toppled like a tree, and by the time his partner jerked the barrel of the rifle in that direction, there was no one there.

…Ray's Awakened Ability, on the other hand, did allow him to become invisible — even if there were some limitations to that

Ability, as well.

In any case, he only needed half a second to reach the remaining robber, this time. Ray ruthlessly kicked him in the stomach, grabbed his rifle to prevent it from accidentally going off, and then slammed his knee into the man's chin as he bent down from the initial blow.

By then, his Mark had already dealt with the robber it had been strangling.

All four bandits were down, laying on the floor in motionless heaps.

The black snake slithered across the floor and climbed up his leg, disappearing into his sleeve a moment later.

Ray looked at the hostages, who were staring at him in shock and fear.

He remained still for a moment, then raised a hand and brought his index finger to his lips, as if telling them to be quiet.

Then, he suddenly disappeared, leaving only four motionless bodies in his wake.

Now, all he needed to do was get to the bank's grid control room and wait for Corsair's signal.

Fleur was also in the vault, and while Ray was not happy about being separated from her during a dangerous mission, he knew that she could fend for herself. His sweetheart was a healer, yes… but she had received the same training he did. Plus, Rain and Tamar were there as well.

'Only I am stuck running boring chores…'

Sighing bitterly, he remembered the blueprints of the bank they had studied in advance and rushed to the grid control center.

***

June listened to the exchange between the Vault Keeper and the Tyrant without showing any interest in it. Of course, in truth, he was

following the conversation quite intently.

'Six Awakened combatants, one Master…'

The situation was not great, but it was not terrible either.

As long as the Ascended was taken down swiftly, the rest were not going to pose a problem.

Of course, June was not going to attack the enemy Master before learning what, exactly, had the man come here to steal.

Then, the Tyrant went and summoned a Fallen Echo.

That spoiled June's mood somewhat, but not by much. Nothing really changed — quickly killing the leader of the zealots was still his primary goal. When the Tyrant died, his Echo would disappear with him.

His first mission as a member of the Shadow Clan was truly quite precarious. June was supposed to learn what the cult was searching for and take the zealots down, despite the fact that their leader was an Ascended. At the same time, he had to make sure that the hostages weren't hurt… or at least not hurt too badly.

The decision on how far the zealots were allowed to go was left to his discretion. Take the Vault Keeper, for example… was he supposed to let the Tyrant torture her? Or would that be crossing the line?

Usually, June would have had strict parameters for a job, but the Shadow Clan gave its members a lot of autonomy. He was not merely a hired gun anymore — he was expected to exercise his own judgment and make decisions that would benefit the clan of his own accord.

Which was already uncharted territory, and now there was also an unpredictable VIP added to the equation.

The princess...

Worse still, the enemy was in possession of a Fallen Echo. The question of whether or not June would allow the Vault Keeper to be

tortured was moot now — the Tyrant had decided to go straight for murder.

The murderous zealot, meanwhile, was speaking once again:

"...So, Vault Keeper, you have a choice. You can either get to know my friend better, or hand over a Memory called the Key of Ascension voluntarily."

June smiled slightly behind the mask.

'Ah… thank you kindly.'

The man just offered June the name of the Memory the cult was searching for.

Which meant that June did not need him alive anymore.

Suppressing his killing intent — some enemies were quite sensitive to it — June took a step forward while manifesting his Mark into a weapon and stabbed it into the Tyrant's skull.

There was no warning, no indication that he would attack. Just a swift and ruthless strike that was supposed to end the zealot's life.

But that was the thing about fighting Awakened…

Awakened were very hard to predict.

The moment his weapon met the enemy's head, it felt as if he was trying to pierce metal. The bastard must have possessed a powerful defensive Aspect.

'Well… crap.'

June activated his own Awakened Ability, slowing down time.

"Ray, now!"

Somewhere far away, Ray heard his voice through a special communication Memory shared between the three members of the team and cut the power.

The artificial lights, the video walls, the climate control systems… everything in the vault that needed power to function was immediately disabled, plunging the spacious room into utter darkness.

And darkness…

Was the territory of the Shadows.

Chapter-2421: In Slow Motion

June possessed quite a strange Aspect.

His Dormant Aspect Ability was subtle, but versatile and very useful — it made him exceptionally observant.

His senses were sharper than those of most people, and he could discern many things that others would not notice. More than that, time seemed to slow down around him when he was focused or full of adrenaline — but that was merely an illusion. In truth, time flowed at its usual pace, and it was rather June's ability to perceive and assess his surroundings that outpaced it.

In other words, he saw the movements of his enemies in slow motion. June was moving just as slowly, since his speed was not given a corresponding boost — however, he had more time to perceive what his enemies were doing and come up with the best possible countermeasures.

Added to his already excellent observation skills and conditioning, that made him seem like someone with an impossibly quick reaction speed and insidiously keen judgment… as a side effect, June had earned a reputation of a man with ice flowing through his veins, since he never flinched and was never startled, remaining completely unfazed no matter what happened.

His Dormant Aspect Ability had saved his hide countless times — it had always been powerful, and after years of specialized training, June learned to draw out its full potential.

His Awakened Aspect Ability, however, was anything but straightforward.

It allowed him to actually slow time down… well, not quite. Rather, it allowed him to slow down things, people, and creatures.

There was a catch, though. His Ability targeted an area instead of an entity — and within that area, different things were affected differently.

Those more powerful than him would be slowed down less than those of equal power to his own, while those weaker than him would be slowed down more… additionally, only their bodies would be affected, while their ability to perceive and assess information would remain the same. Inanimate objects and phenomena, meanwhile, were slowed down the most.

June was not immune to his own Ability, either, which meant that he had to use it cautiously and with foresight. He could cast it in front of himself to slow down a speeding bullet and step out of its path, for example, or to escape an explosion. But if he wanted to engage a powerful enemy in melee, slowing them both down would be the death of him — after all, he would be affected more than his foe.

Still, once his backstab failed to kill the Tyrant, June plunged the entire vault into the mire of slowed time to give Ray enough time to cut the power.

Once darkness swallowed the entire bank, the Shadows received a decisive advantage against the enemy.

June made a sign, telegraphing his intent:

[Tyrant.]

At the same time, Tamar of Sorrow made one, as well.

[Echo.]

In the next moment, June deactivated his Awakened Ability, and the underground vault exploded into chaos.

"Corsaaaair!"

The Tyrant's voice thundered in the darkness, full of murderous wrath… and something else entirely. In fact, it was a full-blown sonic attack — luckily, June had already disappeared from his previous position, so he was not caught in the destructive shockwave.

Fleur dashed forward, grabbing the Vault Keeper and pushing her to the ground.

Tamar of Sorrow had already destroyed her restraints and exploded forward with stunning speed. The young woman seemed to step on air as she soared above the Fallen Devil — her Mark of Shadows assumed the shape of a black greatsword, and she brought it down on the towering creature's appalling head with a spin.

The princess took a leisurely step to the side, putting the mass of the lumbering Echo between herself and the Awakened robbers, then opened her mouth as if to say something.

…The zealots opened fire.

'You absolute idiots…'

June wasted a whole fraction of a second to bemoan the lack of professional standards the wannabe outlaws were displaying.

Who the hell fired blindly in a closed space? Sure, neither the Tyrant nor his Echo would be harmed by mundane bullets, but the six Awakened henchmen could easily shoot each other instead of their enemies.

And indeed, none of the bullets hit their marks.

Fleur and the Vault Keeper were on the floor, Tamar of Sorrow was three meters above ground, Princess Rain was protected by the mass of the towering Echo, while June…

June was protected by the Tyrant.

The Ascended zealot had already turned around, so a few bullets hit him in the back of the head, ricocheting away with metallic ringing.

"Stop firing, you…"

Before he could finish the sentence, June crashed into him like a battering ram.

His goal right now was to separate the Tyrant from the rest of the

Shadows and bring him as far away from the princess as possible. So, he grabbed the man and allowed momentum to carry them both in the direction of the nearest wall.

They struck it with devastating force, breaking through — June had known all along that while the outer walls of the vault were heavily armored and even protected by runic sorcery, the ones separating the rooms inside were merely decorative.

So, he and the Tyrant fell into the Vault Keeper's parlor in a rain of debris.

As they fell, June stabbed the Ascended man three times — one time in the neck, one time between the ribs, and one time in the inner thigh, hoping to cut at least one of the arteries.

Sadly, the Tyrant's entire body seemed to be protected by the mysterious Aspect Ability. June's black stiletto scraped harmlessly against the man's skin, failing to pierce it.

Perhaps a more powerful weapon would have done the job, but June was an Awakened, and therefore, his Mark of Shadows was only as powerful as an Awakened weapon would have been.

'Blast it.'

Usually, summoning Memories would have been a bad decision in this situation — not only because Memories took time to manifest, but also because they came into existence as whirlwinds of radiant sparks. Members of the Shadow Clan thrived in darkness, though, so illuminating themselves in such a manner was unwise.

That was why the Memories forged for them by the Lord of Shadows manifested from strings of darkness, instead. Some of them — weapons in particular — could be summoned instantly, as well.

Sadly… June found himself unable to summon Memories.

The world seemed to slow down as he came to terms with the sudden revelation, contemplated possible reasons, and came to a probable conclusion.

'Huh.'

It seemed like the enchanted restraints placed on Awakened hostages… were not enchanted at all. Rather, they were merely meant to mask someone's Aspect Ability.

The Tyrant's Aspect Ability, most likely. The man could suppress the flow of essence, thus interfering with the Aspect Abilities of other Awakened and preventing them from summoning Memories.

So… what was June supposed to do if his weapon could not pierce the Ascended zealot's flesh, and he could not summon a different blade?

The Tyrant's mask had been destroyed by the sonic attack, revealing his chiseled face. He opened his mouth, beginning to say something.

It had the potential to be a taunt... or another sonic blast.

...Having considered his options, June swung his fist and punched the Master in the face.

Chapter-2422: Shadows Vs. Zealots, Fight

Striking the Tyrant with a fist felt like striking armored alloy… which was not too bad, since June had had the unfortunate experience of tearing through an APC or two with his bare hands before.

No matter how strong an Ascended was, they were still beholden to the laws of physics. The Tyrant was thrown down, the back of his head cracking the floor. Before he could recover, June struck him again, and then again, and again…

His arms moved like pistons, his fists falling down like hydraulic power hammers. He could not stab the enemy to death, so blunt force trauma and concussive force were the next best thing — June put as much strength as he could muster into each punch, making sure not to shatter his own bones in the process.

Being a member of the Shadow Clan was not without its perks, but there were drawbacks as well. Perhaps the most significant of them was that servants of the Dark Lord did not belong to the Flame Domain anymore, and were therefore devoid of Changing Star's grace. Miraculous flames were not going to descend to soothe their pain and heal their wounds, so they always had to be cautious.

More cautious than those who walked in the light were, at least.

'Come… on!'

The Tyrant seemed a little dazed, but not at all as hurt as June had hoped he would be. Worse still, the man was already coming to his senses. There was blood pouring from his nose and from his mouth, where a tooth or two must have been dislodged, but his eyes had regained their murderous glint.

Three seconds had already passed since the moment the power was cut, even if it felt like much longer. That meant that things were about to get far more difficult for the Shadows.

It took some time to summon Memories, but those of them that produced light were usually the simplest and weakest of them, which meant that they could be summoned swiftly. If even one of the zealots had reacted quickly, the darkness that gave June and his people a decisive advantage could be dispelled at any moment.

But June had to concentrate on the Tyrant. Now that the man had regained his senses, trying to crack his skull with a barrage of blows was not an option anymore — engaging a Master in hand-to-hand combat was a perilous idea at the best of times, but trying to grapple one was pure suicide.

So, June disengaged and jumped back, activating his Awakened Ability once again to slow the Tyrant down. His essence felt sluggish, but his control of it was refined enough to break through the unknown hex.

The Ascended zealot still moved with a speed that left June appalled, jumping to his feet and summoning a whirlwind of sparks to illuminate his surroundings.

To June, the countless sparks seemed to drift slowly through the air.

He studied his enemy.

The Tyrant was older than he had assumed, his unshaven face pale and harsh. His equipment was mundane, offering no additional protection. Being stabbed, shot in the back of the head, slammed through a wall, and repeatedly punched in the face did not seem to have affected him in any significant manner…

Blood flowing from his nose and his mouth was going to compromise his breathing, though. The man was left-handed, but his right eye was the dominant one. He also protected his left side slightly, most likely subconsciously, hinting at an old wound that was still letting itself be known, or at least a psychological habit…

Not much to work with.

June sighed, deactivated his Awakened Aspect Ability, and lunged forward.

…Outside the devastated parlor, many things had happened in these three long seconds.

The Fallen Devil had lost half of its tentacle and was pushed to the corner of the room by Tamar's furious assault. Her black greatsword was a Memory forged for her by Sunny himself — its enchantments were quite perplexing, making the brutish weapon exponentially deadlier the faster its wielder was moving and granting it far greater power if the wielder was completely airborne, not touching the ground at all.

That and the element of surprise allowed Tamar to push the towering Echo back. Now, however, the Devil had regained its wits and was about to launch a counterattack.

Rain, meanwhile, had used the first second to assign herself an Epithet. As an Awakened, she could maintain two at the same time, so she granted the same Epithet to Fleur, too.

It was quite a simple one…

Bulletproof.

"Fleur, now!"

As the Vault Keeper pressed herself into the floor, the two young women rushed toward the robbers. The darkness was only broken by the muzzle flashes and ethereal glow of swirling sparks of light, so the enemies could not really aim at them… still, six automatic rifles produced a lot of bullets.

Rain was hit in the shoulder. Despite the Epithet she had assigned herself, she was not entirely bulletproof… a direct hit from a heavy railgun would have probably punched right through her body. She would not have been able to protect a mundane person from being killed by less destructive firearms, either — after all, it was not in the nature of mundane people to be immune to bullets.

But she was an Awakened instead. Awakened did possess some measure of resistance to mundane weapons, so the Epithet she had given herself did not have to fundamentally change her nature. It simply had to enhance a quality that she already possessed, so the effect was more than potent enough to allow her to shrug off the hit and continue to move forward as if nothing had happened.

The same held true for Fleur, even if the Epithet assigned to her was not tied to a True Name, and was therefore less effective.

Both of them reached the zealots in one piece.

What happened next was quite predictable. Rain and Fleur were exceptionally skilled Awakened warriors with fully saturated cores and rich, dreadful experience of fighting a war in Godgrave under their belts. More than that, they could see in the dark, while their enemies could not.

The only difficulty was that Rain could not kill their opponents, and had to subdue them while keeping everyone alive instead.

The robbers were already summoning luminous Memories, as well…

And yet, none of them managed to benefit from that light.

By the time the first lantern manifested itself into existence, all six assailants were already either dead or unconscious. Rain and Fleur had bulldozed through them at stunning speed, moving as swiftly and subtly as real shadows would.

All in all, it took them no more than six seconds.

And on the seventh second…

Tamar hissed, stepping on air to push herself back. The Echo still managed to reach her with its claws, sending the young woman rolling across the floor.

At the same time, Corsair was tossed through the broken wall — instead of crushing into the ground, however, he spun and landed on his feet, regaining his balance a split second later with an inexplicable level of nonchalance.

The Tyrant and his Echo faced the four Shadows, sending a shiver running down Rain's spine.

'I think… I better think of something fast…'

Chapter-2423: Silence is Golden

The Tyrant walked out of the ruined parlor like a sinister spirit, three luminous Memories igniting above his shoulders and above his head like three eyes of a ferocious monster. His black fatigues were covered in dust, and his face was smeared in blood.

His glassy eyes were gleaming with cold, murderous wrath.

Walking over to stand side by side with his Echo, he looked at the three Shadows darkly. The Vault Keeper moved to stand behind them, shielding her eyes from the bright light.

Four Awakened against a Master and an Echo of a Fallen Devil…

They glanced at each other.

'Should we stall to give Ray an opportunity to get down here?'

Rain hesitated for a moment. She did not know the plan of Corsair's team, but was pretty sure that Ray had dealt with the four henchmen the robbers had left to guard the hostages by now. The young man was not the most formidable fighter of their cohort, but he was its hidden weapon — he was exceptionally deadly, often striking from the shadows to bring down enemies much more powerful than him.

However, the Tyrant's potent defensive Aspect Ability would make it hard for Ray to kill him in a single strike. More than that, they would have to engage the Ascended man in conversation to stall for time…

And Rain had a feeling that letting the Tyrant talk would be a big mistake.

'What to do?'

Corsair shifted slightly, taking something off his belt. Rain's eyes

widened slightly when she recognized what the tall man was gripping in both hands.

'G—grenades?'

What was he planning to do?

And what kind of Awakened carried grenades around, anyway?! She had only seen them in movies before!

Corsair seemed to smile coldly behind his devilish mask.

Tamar raised her greatsword slightly, preparing to dash forward.

Fleur braced herself, shielding the Vault Keeper with her body.

The Tyrant opened his mouth…

And froze in confusion, failing to make a sound.

Well, of course he failed.

After all, Rain had assigned him an Epithet just then.

The Tyrant… became the Mute Tyrant.

'Ouch…'

Forcefully placing an Epithet on an unwilling Ascended was difficult, strenuous, and burned through her essence with dire speed on top of that. The sinister Master would most likely shake the effects off in a moment or two — but that was alright.

Because Rain was not done yet. She wanted to try something else, as well.

Turning to the Echo, she concentrated and Named it, turning it from a nameless Echo into the Gross Friend of the Mute Tyrant.

And then, she assigned an Epithet to the Echo, connecting it to the given Name.

This one was quite simple, and did not go against the nature of the

Echo at all — in fact, it was reliant on its nature.

Just like that, the Gross Friend of the Mute Tyrant became…

The Dismissed Gross Friend of the Mute Tyrant.

'Be gone!'

Rain poured her essence and willpower into the Epithet, praying that this unconventional application of her Aspect would work.

And did it.

A moment later, the Echo exploded into a whirlwind of sparks, pouring back into the Tyrant's soul.

"Attack!"

The gross Echo was not destroyed, merely dismissed. So, the Ascended bandit could easily summon it again — it would take some time to manifest the hideous Devil for the second time, though.

They had to finish the Tyrant before that happened.

The sinister Master was, without a doubt, surprised by the sudden vanishing of his Echo. The Shadows, however, were accustomed to all kinds of strange and inexplicable things — after all, they came from the Dark City, where the Lord of Shadows reigned.

…Rain's brother was a weirdo to put all other weirdos to shame. If he proclaimed himself to be the second most bizarre person in the world — two worlds, even — no one would dare to claim the first place.

So, they reacted instantly.

Tamar exploded forward, turning into a blur. Corsair was not far behind, with Rain and Fleur following.

Four black weapons were aimed at the Tyrant's vital points… well, Rain aimed a little off the mark, knowing that she would not be able to hit him where it counted.

However, even caught by surprise, a Master was still a Master.

The Tyrant moved with terrible speed, dodging Tamar despite her Awakened Ability. In the next moment, his hands shot forward to grab her neck — then, both of them slowed down, as if caught in a mire.

The Tyrant was reaching toward Tamar, who was dodging away. Her hair fluttered in the wind, rippling slowly... her hands shifted slowly on the hilt of the black greatsword, pushing and pulling to turn its massive blade around.

The blade was mere centimeters away from the Ascended bandit's torso, but at the speed it was moving, he would not be cut any time soon.

Then, Corsair slammed into the Tyrant, throwing them both back. Time resumed its usual flow, and the two men hit the floor a dozen meters away from the rest of them.

Something rang as it rolled on the floor.

Those... were the safety pins of the grenades.

Rain's eyes widened.

"You crazy…"

At the last moment, Corsair managed to push himself away, sliding back across the floor.

Still.

When the grenades detonated, he was no more than a couple of meters away from the explosion.

The Tyrant was suddenly enveloped in light and flame. The flame, the shrapnel, the shockwave moved slowly, however, blooming in all directions like a strange, beautiful, radiant flower. Corsair was right in front of the slowly exploding ring of fire and shrapnel, his kneeling figure countered against it sharply.

"...bastard!"

Something moved within the flame.

A Master was not going to be killed by a couple of mundane grenade, of course.

He was not even going to be seriously hurt by them.

...Unless Rain got involved.

Dismissing the "Mute" Epithet, she assigned two new ones to the Slow, Combustible Tyrant.

Then, she opened her mouth…

And spoke the True Name of Fire.

Chapter-2424: The Word is Mightier than the Grenade

The flames suddenly grew in intensity, and a wave of unbearable heat washed over the bank vault. The figure imprisoned in the slowly blooming explosion shuddered and convulsed, a strangely distorted scream reaching Rain's ears.

She knew that the Tyrant was not going to be killed by the flames. The very fact that she had been able to speak the Name of Fire proved it — her Flaw would have prevented her from channeling it otherwise.

However, he would definitely be hurt by the explosion... a lot.

Not only was the Tyrant more susceptible to being burned because of the Epithet she had assigned him, but her other Epithet synergized with Corsair's Aspect, slowing the burning Master down even more.

The man himself rolled away from the explosion, escaping it entirely.

Jumping to his feet near Rain, he gazed at her with his piercing blue eyes and said evenly from under his hideous mask:

"...I thought you were a pacifist?"

Rain smiled brilliantly.

"I am!"

With that, she turned to the burning Master and dismissed the Combustible Epithet, replacing it with another one.

Hyperalgesic...

Extremely sensitive to pain.

Rain was not going to admit why she even knew that word, but she did.

And as a result, the strangely distorted scream turned into a strangely distorted howl.

Corsair stared at her with his calm blue eyes.

But…

Did Rain imagine it, or had the tall man shivered slightly?

Surely, it was just her imagination…

Some time later, the commotion was over.

The robbers — who had turned out to be zealots — were unconscious and restrained. The badly burned corpse of the Tyrant was covered by a sheet.

Rain had not killed him, of course. Like the peaceful and harmless person that she was, she simply made him wail and convulse in agony while Tamar and Corsair finished the job.

She had suggested sparing the murderous zealot and merely knocking him out, even, but Corsair had other ideas. She could understand his decision, as well — the Awakened criminals were already difficult to contain, but imprisoning an unhinged Master demanded a wealth of resources the government did not possess.

The government was barely holding the world from falling apart as it was.

In any case, the lockdown was lifted from the bank. Corsair, Ray, and Fleur disappeared without a trace, while Rain and Tamar stayed behind to have a talk with the government forces.

Tamar's status as a Legacy and a former centurion of the Seventh Royal Legion would come in handy to explain how a dozen Awakened criminals and an Ascended mastermind ended in their current pitiful state.

After checking on the hostages and releasing them from the restraints, the two of them walked outside.

As they waited for the police to arrive in front of the bank's doors, Rain looked around, her gaze lingering on the graffiti marring the walls for a moment.

She sighed.

NQSC had really changed. In the past, there would not have been graffiti in such a prestigious district. Especially one lacking any artistic value... just a mess of letters drawn in faded paint.

There would not have been crazed zealots robbing banks, either.

She looked at Tamar.

"Hey. We did not just happen to be in that bank by accident, did we?"

Tamar gave her an impassive stare.

Eventually, though, she shrugged.

"Maybe."

Rain raised a hand and flicked her on the forehead.

"I knew it! Why, though? Don't get me wrong, I do not mind foiling a bank robbery. Actually, it was kind of exciting. But I am so busy today — I have to speak in front of a large crowd in an hour!"

She made a pitiful face.

Tamar glanced at her, remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"Your brother is preoccupied at the moment. So, Aiko asked me to evaluate Corsair's performance and back his team up if necessary. Granted… she probably did not expect that I'd take you with me."

Rain chuckled.

"So why did you?"

Tamar looked at her with the usual stern frown.

"I mean… you're kind of hard to get rid of, you know?"

A rare smile illuminated her face, and she looked away.

"Plus, I wanted you to see Corsair in action and get your opinion. I am assembling a cohort to challenge the Second Nightmare, you know. I had my eye on him, but needed to make sure that he'll fit."

Rain smiled, as well.

"And what do you think? Will he fit?"

Tamar nodded.

"Sure. Asterion will fit just fine."

Rain blinked.

"Huh?"

Had she heard wrong?

"What did you say?"

Tamar looked at her in confusion.

"I said that Corsair will fit just fine. Why?"

Rain tilted her head a little.

"Ah. I think you misspoke."

She pointed to the wall.

"That graffiti must have been on your mind, huh?"

There, someone had written in large, bold letters:

AS TE RI ON.

"What's an asterion, anyway?"

Tamar studied the graffiti for a moment, as if noticing it only now, then frowned and shook her head.

"No idea. Sounds a bit familiar, I guess?"

Somewhere far away, sirens broke the silence. Rain patted Tamar on the shoulder.

"Well… you'll deal with it. I have an academic report to make."

Turning around, she started to walk away.

The strange word got stuck in her mind, repeating itself like an earworm:

'Asterion, asterion… as-te-ri-on…'

***

In a hallway in Ravenheart, Sunny stopped and leaned on the wall.

He had just remembered receiving a report about the bank robbery, and Rain's participation in it.

'She did what?'

"Rain… cooked a Master alive?!"

Alive being the key word.

And she had forcefully dismissed an Echo, too. Apparently, that was something his sister was capable of, now.

According to the report, she had been inspired to try something like that after seeing the cooked Master's Aspect Ability, which allowed him to prevent Awakened from summoning Memories.

If someone could interfere with summoning Memories, why wouldn't someone be able to interfere with dismissing them?

"No, but why the hell is she going around getting into fights with Masters, in the first place?"

He had turned away for a minute… not even that!

One-seventh of him had turned away.

Sunny huffed and puffed, angry that Rain had been put in the position where she had to face a hostile Ascended. And with barely anyone... except for four elite agents of the Shadow Clan... present to protect her!

'What have I assigned Quentin to Bastion for? Could he not have followed her to NQSC?'

Shaking his head, Sunny continued walking.

'I need to have a serious talk with Aiko about that incident.'

But just then, another memory from the past few weeks surfaced in his mind.

Sunny froze, then let out a hollow laugh.

"What... what did Aiko do? Huh?!"

Chapter-2425: Aiko's Day Off

Aiko studied the sky thoughtfully.

The sky was vast, blue, and full of sunlight. White clouds were drifting across its peaceful azure expanse like cotton candy, carried by warm winds.

She was pleased.

'Ah, finally!'

It was nice to see the light of day again after spending so long on the Forgotten Shore. The starless void of its orphaned sky was black and cold, with not even a moon to keep it company... poor thing! The land itself was devoid of warmth and light, as well — it was quiet and tranquil, but not exactly vibrant.

So, visiting Bastion was something Aiko had been looking forward to very much.

Not the least of all because people could actually appreciate her stylish outfit here. Members of the Shadow Clan could see in the dark, true, but they had trouble discerning colors — everything was a shade of grey for them. Most could not tell silk from satin, either, let alone appreciate the nuances of exquisite fashion.

Now that Aiko was finally wealthy enough to afford the finer things of life, leaving her wonderful ensembles unappreciated was a despicable crime.

Feeling fierce and invincible in her white silk blouse, black skirt, flawlessly fitted vest, and tastefully embroidered blazer, she walked down the streets of the Castle with determined steps. Her sharp heels sang as they hit the cobblestones, and her hair fluttered in the wind.

All items of her ensemble were bespoke. The vest and the blazer were detailed tastefully with silver thread, which added to the subtle gleam of silver buttons and cufflinks — the latter set with onyx gemstones. Her shoes were made from lacquered black leather, with large silver buckles creating a fascinating contrast with the dainty black bows above.

Aiko chose not to wear any jewelry, knowing that it would only cheapen her look — well, except for a few charms hidden under her blouse for protection.

She looked sophisticated, she looked chic… and most importantly, she looked exceedingly affluent! Anyone who knew anything would recognize just how exorbitantly expensive each item of her stylish ensemble was. Those who knew a thing or two about fashion, meanwhile, would be amazed to recognize the subdued cut of her outfit for what it was.

The ensemble Aiko wore was not just any random arrangement of complementary clothes. It was actually a tasteful reimagining of the suit Morgan of Valor had worn to the last ever Valor Ball, designed and sewn by the same tailor — who was supposed to have retired after the fall of the Sword Domain.

That was why it had cost Aiko a fortune.

'Worth it!'

She grinned, almost missing a large puddle in front of her. Her beautiful shoe was about to touch the dirty water when the petite girl floated into the air, gliding gracefully to the dry cobblestones on the other side.

Landing softly, she turned around and smiled triumphantly.

"Not today, puddle!"

Ignoring the stares of the passersby, she raised her chin and continued on her way with confident — albeit quite modest in length — strides.

Reaching one of the inner walls of the Castle, Aiko floated to the

battlements instead of passing through a nearby gate. Standing there, she enjoyed the view of the glistening lake and of the great city beyond.

Bastion had grown tremendously since the first time she saw it. Back then, when Aiko was a youth who had just escaped the Forgotten Shore, there was not even a city on the shores of the lake — every Awakened sheltered by the Great Citadel, including her and Kai, lived within the Castle. There was nothing but ash and Nightmare Creatures waiting for them beyond its walls.

Things were different now, of course. Bastion sprawled around the lake, with no end in sight — the city was vast and immense, sheltering close to a hundred million people. Unlike the claustrophobic cities of Earth, which endlessly grew upward or burrowed into the ground to stay within the narrow confines of defensive barriers, it stretched in all directions freely.

The buildings of Bastion were relatively low — not only because building towering human hives in the Dream Realm, where most of modern technology turned useless, was all but impossible unless sorcery or people with powerful Utility Aspects were involved, but also because there was no need to build them high.

Aiko liked it better. She liked looking up and not feeling crushed by the looming mass of alloy and concrete… or crimson coral… and breathing in the vastness of the sky with a full chest.

Of course, sustaining a city of such size in the Dream Realm was no easy task. In fact, the rate with which Bastion had sprouted from the ash was nothing short of impossible — if not for the countless Awakened working day and night to build homes for the refugees of Antarctica and new settlers, none of it would have been here.

The city was at capacity and tearing at the seams, though. These days, most of the settlers were channeled to other Citadels across the vast reaches of the former Sword Domain, while those in the west traveled along the River of Tears to settle down in one of the human strongholds situated in its basin.

There were countless problems to be solved in Bastion. It was all

boiling and changing, taking shape and crumbling, always one step away from complete collapse…

Which meant that there were countless opportunities to be reaped.

Aiko was not the same youth anymore, either. She had changed, too. She had gone from running a gambling den in the Bright Castle to running the entirety of the Dark City… as well as the powerful shadow organization dwelling there.

'Naturally, there's the Boss… but let's be honest here. That walking calamity can't even manage himself. I mean, how did he manage to lose one of his incarnations? Who does that? Who has incarnations, and who goes around losing them?!'

Aiko scoffed and prepared to glide off the wall.

At that moment, however, a polite voice interrupted her:

"Excuse me, my lady… flying is forbidden in the inner rings of the city."

Turning her head, Aiko tried to look at the Awakened guards who had approached her while patrolling the wall. Sadly, she had to crane her neck to actually look them in the eye…

So, instead, she floated up until she could look down at them snobbishly.

"Good to know, thank you. However, I am obviously floating, not flying."

The guard who had spoken to her blinked.

"What is the difference?"

Aiko gave him a confused look and did not respond immediately, as if stunned into silence by the question.

Eventually, she said:

"Velocity. Velocity is the difference."

She floated with the help of the Awakened Ability, and pushed herself with the help of her Dormant Ability. So, her speed had never been too great.

The guards glanced at each other. The other one shook his head.

"No… as stated by the regulations regarding unconventional spatial movement, flying is constituted by aerial movement with the help of a self-generated directional force, while floating and gliding are constituted by the lack of said directional force. You were obviously flying, my lady. I am deeply sorry, but we will have to fine you. It is really a small sum."

Aiko smiled dangerously.

"Oh? Well, in that case, by all means… over my dead body."

They wanted to fine her?

In their dreams!

The guards stared at her with lost expressions.

"Excuse me?"

Aiko crossed her arms haughtily.

"Do you even know who I am?!"

They studied her expensive outfit for a few moments, then frowned.

"No, we don't. We have no idea. But what does that..."

Aiko smiled brilliantly.

"Wonderful!"

With that, she allowed the wind to carry her over the lip of the wall and glided swiftly toward the crowds of people below. After all, since they had no idea who she was, they would not be able to find her in the city of a hundred million people.

The guards were so shocked that they were a second too late to react.

"Hey, wait a moment!"

But Aiko was already gone, enjoying the beautiful boon of anonymity.

'Directional force, directional force... bah, how silly! As if I'll allow myself to lose money over something like that...'

Chapter-2426: The Fine Nuances of Printing Money

Bastion was too vast now to travel across it on foot — granted, Aiko's destination was not far from the lakeshore. Leaving the ferry, she thought about hailing a carriage, but then stumbled upon a shop window and became enthralled, staring at the displayed items with gleaming eyes.

It occurred to Aiko that she had made a terrible mistake when choosing her outfit. Living in the darkness of the Dark City must have messed with her fashion sense, after all… she had gotten so used to only seeing the world in shades of grey that she neglected to add a splash of color to her ensemble!

'Ah, what an oversight!'

Aiko was utterly mortified.

'That red scarf… those ruby cufflinks… those shoes with scarlet soles!'

No, no… she couldn't. After all, her outfit was an homage to the criminally underappreciated icon of fashion, Morgan of Valor herself — not a shameless imitation. Morgan had those stunning vermilion eyes, which held the entire ensemble together. That was why her outfits went well with red accents and ruby accessories!

Aiko, sadly, did not have vermilion eyes. Her eyes were brown, so…

'Blue? Green? No, those won't go well with silver. Pink? How about purple?'

She glared at the store window, almost burning a hole in it.

In the past, when Aiko was poor and destitute — long before her Awakening, even — she had spent countless hours in front of shop windows like this one, staring at beautiful things that she knew would only be hers in her fantasies.

But now, she was not one for window shopping.

Why stare at windows when she could buy anything she wanted in the shop, or even buy the shop itself?

Walking inside the boutique, she gave the staff a neutral look.

The professionals immediately evaluated her clothes, accessories, and general appearance. A moment later, their expressions changed, and bright smiles illuminated their faces.

"My lady! Welcome!"

Aiko allowed a corner of her mouth to curl upward.

'Ah. Being rich is really the best.'

Then, she raised her hand and pointed to a shelf.

"This. And this. And this one, as well… also that one, and that one, and that one over there…"

She lost track of time. After a while, a mountain of colorful boxes was in front of her, and the smiles of the staff grew so wide that their faces were on the verge of cracking.

"That would be… one hundred coins, my lady."

Aiko produced her coin purse, untied it, and emptied it onto the counter.

The clerk's eyes glinted sharply.

Hers did, as well.

Now came the important part… haggling!

Of course, as civilized and refined people, they were not going to

haggle over the price of purchased items.

Instead, they had to haggle over the price of her money.

Aiko pointed to her coins.

"As you can see, these are prime-condition Ravenheart coins. So, I am willing to pay fifty of those."

The clerk smiled pleasantly.

"Ah, but the quality of recently minted Ravenheart coins is not as superior as it used to be. Even if it was, surely, they would not be twice as valuable… maybe a tenth more valuable, at best. I am very sorry to say this, my lady, but I can't surrender these beautiful things to you for less than ninety of these coins."

Coins minted in Bastion and Ravenheart were supposed to be identical, containing a set amount of soul essence. But the way they were minted and infused with essence was not completely precise. Different mints, and even different batches from the same mint, produced slightly different results.

Ravenheart coins were generally more valuable, although that too depended on many factors.

Aiko raised her hand and shook a finger.

"Oh, but your eyesight must not be sharp. It seems that you failed to notice that these coins over there are not merely Ravenheart coins. They are in fact Song Domain coins in pristine condition. Come to think of it, I think I failed to notice that as well… my, how silly of me! So, I am willing to part with forty of these beautiful coins…"

The clerk's face paled in fear.

How did fifty coins turn into forty? Wasn't she supposed to increase the price, instead?!

Worst of all, he could not even dispute this tiny girl's logic...

Apart from the coins minted in Bastion and Ravenheart these days,

there also remained coins minted by the fallen Song and Sword Domains. Their quality was not that superior to the modern coinage — in fact, it was inferior in most regards. And yet, they were quite a bit more valuable, for no other reason than that they were much rarer.

Since the two Domains had only minted money for a few years before disappearing into the annals of history, there would never be a new batch of Song and Sword coins produced by humans. Their number was limited, and plummeting swiftly — after all, essence coins could be consumed to get a boost of essence in a difficult situation.

So, their rarity alone inflated their value.

People were strange creatures that way, seeing value in things that lacked it simply because other people would not be able to possess them, as well.

The clerk gulped.

"F—forty? N—no, I couldn't… after all, we are all Bastion natives here. Those… those pesky Song coins are… are not welcomed here?"

His voice did not sound confident.

Aiko smiled triumphantly.

"Money doesn't stink, you know. But actually… I bet carrying all these coins would be cumbersome for you. How about I pay with something else?"

Suddenly, a different coin appeared between her fingers. That one was larger and heavier, entirely black, and etched with a symbol of a coiled serpent.

The clerk's eyes widened drastically.

"Is that… is that a shadow coin?"

He reached forward with a trembling hand.

Aiko grinned, retracting her own.

"Indeed, it is. So, how about I pay with only one?"

The clerk hesitated for a few moments.

If the old Domain coins were valuable, then Shadow Coins were extremely so. Nobody knew where they came from and who was minting them, but everyone wanted to possess one — that was because they were not essence coins.

Instead, they were fragment coins. Consuming them did not grant Awakened essence, and instead granted them a soul fragment — or even a few, if the coin was of a high denomination.

Of course, there were easier ways to obtain soul fragments. Purchasing a soul shard, for example, was far more attainable than hunting down the elusive shadow coins.

But it was exactly that elusiveness, that mystique, and that great rarity that made them true treasures.

The Shadow Coins, of course, were produced by the Dark Castle — the Marvelous Mimic — and did not cost Aiko anything. All she had to do to get them was keep the Mimic on a steady diet of harrowing Nightmare Creatures, which was a great way to make money out of thin air.

The clerk accepted the coin with greed in his eyes and forced out a polite smile.

"Wonderful, my lady. Please visit our establishment again. Oh… do you need help carrying the boxes to your carriage?"

Aiko grinned.

"No need…"

Summoning a beautiful purse crafted from black leather, she opened it and placed the first box inside. The box was larger than the purse, and yet, it disappeared without a trace.

The second box did, as well… and the third… and the fourth.

Before too long, the mountain of boxes vanished completely.

Tying a vibrant cravat around her neck, Aiko smiled in satisfaction.

"Well, then… goodbye!"

With that, she dismissed the purse and left the shop in complete exhilaration.

Of course, she did not forget to gather her coins from the counter first.

'Now... I'm off to see Effie!'

Chapter-2427: Transportation Situation

Aiko was in a great mood as she hailed a carriage, which was her preferred method of moving around Bastion.

Moving around Bastion was somewhat of a complicated matter, actually. There was already a grand project in the works to simplify it — special tramways meant for street cars were being embedded into the main streets, empowered by primitive sorcery. The rails were cast from a special alloy that allowed them to channel essence, while the trams themselves were enchanted to move by absorbing it.

Now that the Rivergate Hydro had gone operational, though, there were talks of discarding the magical street cars in favor of good old-fashioned electric trams. Aiko suspected that, in the end, both types were going to be implemented, with enchanted tramways serving as the thoroughfares of the public transport network while more mundane ones would branch out from them as satellite outlets.

The first street car was supposed to be launched quite soon. Before that happened, though, citizens of Bastion had six main ways to get around the city.

The first one was to use a ferry and cross the lake. Naturally, that could only get one to a different location on the lakeshore — however, considering that the city surrounded the lake like a ring, it was often faster to travel by water before continuing on foot than to make the entire journey while never leaving the land.

The second way was the simplest — it was to use your own two feet. However, Bastion was an enormous city, so one could literally walk for days without ever reaching their destination in case they needed to travel to a distant part of the city. Naturally, Awakened had a great advantage over mundane humans in that regard, but even they

would be hard-pressed to simply walk everywhere.

The third way was much faster, albeit somewhat inconvenient. It was to hire an Awakened rickshaw — those came in all shapes and forms, from individual or two-seat carts to heavy wagons capable of carrying a dozen or more passengers. Their speed and capacity depended entirely on the puller's personal strength, and while most Awakened sought better opportunities, some saw owning a rickshaw as a safe way to make modest amounts of money.

The fourth way was a more comfortable, luxurious, and prestigious version of the third — it was to hire a carriage pulled by an Echo. There was no Beastmaster in Bastion, and therefore no army of enthralled abominations to serve as the engine of civil infrastructure. So, Echoes were the next best thing. Sadly, despite the fact that there were many times more Awakened in the world these days, most of whom were waging war against the Dream Realm on many fronts, there were still not enough Echoes out there to make this mode of transportation widely accessible.

Only affluent people had the means to hire an Echo carriage. Luckily, Aiko was one such person… so, she preferred to hail a carriage, even if there was a faster way to get to where she was going.

That faster way was to ride an Echo mount. Not all Awakened had Echoes, and even fewer had Echoes that could be ridden as mounts — however, owning one was swiftly becoming the epitome of class, prestige, and flare. It was to the point that impressive Echo mounts were not only widely sought after, but also cost more than powerful combat beasts at times. Owning an especially impressive mount could make an Awakened famous and admired by the masses in an instant.

Aiko could probably get herself a pretty, stylish, and utterly magnificent Echo mount… or two… but she did not like riding them at all. Why would she want to toss and rattle on the back of a towering beast? Not only would that ruin her masterfully tousled hair by actually tousling it — the horror! — but it would also wrinkle her clothes, not to mention limiting her wardrobe.

'Thanks, but no thanks!'

The last way of getting around Bastion was quite peculiar and, strangely enough, in competition with personal Echo mounts in terms of convenience. Not only that, but it was easily accessible to every citizen, Awakened or not. That method… was riding a bicycle.

Bicycles were not very complicated machines, so nothing prevented them from being used in the Dream Realm. Citizens of Bastion had developed a great appreciation for bicycles, in fact — most were still imported from the waking world, but some were already being crafted right here in the city. Aiko would know, since she had invested heavily into bicycle manufacturing herself.

She had invested in countless enterprises around Bastion, actually, but the bicycle business was one of her golden geese. So, she loved them a lot… which did not mean that she was inclined to use one as a means of transportation, and for a very simple reason at that.

Aiko could make a bicycle fly… but she had no idea how to ride one.

The entire thing mystified her to no end.

'Should I ask Boss to teach me?'

That'd be a funny story to tell her grandkids one day… if she survived to tell the tale…

In any case, Aiko managed to hail a carriage swiftly. Climbing into the soft seat, she told the driver where she wanted to go and leaned back, enjoying the view and the warmth of the sun on her face.

She even started to hum a happy song quietly, feeling that her day simply could not get any better.

…She was still humming it when the carriage suddenly shook and came to an abrupt halt, as if struck by an earthquake.

Then, an enormous yellow eye appeared outside the window, staring at Aiko with sizzling intensity.

The driver reeled back on his seat, shouting in fear and indignation:

"An… an Echo?! Who let their Echo run wild, dammit?!"

Letting out a sigh, Aiko opened the door and floated out of the carriage.

"Language!"

Outside, an enormous wolf sat on the ground, towering above the carriage like a small mountain of white fur. Its tail was wagging wildly, making the ground shake a little with each hit. The wolf's tongue was hanging sideways from its mouth, and it was panting happily, staring at Aiko with gleaming eyes.

She looked at the driver and frowned.

"That is not an Echo. Can't you see? That… is the venerable Saint Ling. Watch your tongue in front of a child, mister!"

Chapter-2428: Fairy Godmother

"Auntie Aiko! Auntie Aiko! Let's fly!"

"No. Walk on your two feet."

"Don't wanna! Walking on two feet is stupid!"

"What? How is it stupid?"

"Auntie Aiko… four feet is the way to go. Don't you know?"

"Yes, but wolfie, you are a big boy now."

"Ling Ling is not a big boy. I am only six years old!"

"I mean that you are too big to walk on all fours. The street is not wide enough."

"Oh…"

"So…"

"So let's fly!"

Aiko suppressed a smile.

Little Ling had assumed his human form, so she was holding his hand as they walked along a tranquil street. It would have been a cute scene, in normal circumstances, but the two of them made for a strange pair — mainly because she was barely taller than the little boy.

Aiko was very petite, while Little Ling had been abnormally large even as a toddler. Now that he was six whole years old, his height was no different from someone twice his age. It was a bit scary to imagine what the boy would look like when he grew up… the rascal

would probably dwarf even his inordinately tall mom, which was a rare feat.

Still, his height aside, Little Ling looked like an adorable six-year-old now. He was a proper child, not the clumsy toddler he used to be. It was very strange to see him all grown up, forming full sentences, and talking like a little adult.

Aiko had not even had to remind him to summon his clothes when he turned into a human! Her chest swelled with pride.

'Ah, time flies.'

And speaking of flying…

She cleared her throat.

"We can fly when we pass the gate, alright?"

Little Ling smiled radiantly.

"Deal!"

He fell silent for a few moments, and then said thoughtfully:

"But, Auntie Aiko…"

"Yes?"

"Ling Ling is six years old now."

"Uh-huh."

"I turned six last week."

"So?"

"My birthday was last week, too."

"Makes sense. And?"

"But Auntie did not come."

"I am here now, aren't I?"

"But! What about my birthday gift?"

Aiko laughed.

"Am I not enough of a gift?"

Little Ling stared at her with wide eyes, cornered and aghast.

He frowned, thinking hard, and then smiled.

"Auntie Aiko is a gift! But… you are not a birthday gift!"

She grinned.

"Alright, alright. Of course, I brought a gift. Who do you take me for, wolfie?"

Finally, they reached the gate of Effie's estate.

As the Steward of Bastion — and of the entire East — Effie was supposed to reside in the main keep of the great castle. However, she mentioned something about it being too stuffy and remained in her original place of residence, which was a large estate on what had once been the outskirts of the city.

Now, her estate was considered to be in the very heart of it, of course, since the city had grown tremendously. In fact, the very fact that Raised by Wolves herself was residing here made the surrounding area one of the most prestigious and sought-after neighborhoods. The price of land had skyrocketed, and the huge swath of it Effie had claimed when the entire place was a desolate wasteland was suddenly exorbitantly precious.

The wasteland was long gone, of course. Now, there were only neat streets and green trees around, with tasteful manors hidden behind tall hedges and elegant fences. The people living here were all affluent and powerful, most of them of a high Rank and coming from either the old Legacy clans or from the newly risen Transcendent families.

The gate to Effie's estate stood wide open — it had been left that way when Little Ling dashed outside in excitement after catching Aiko's scent. The gate itself was massive enough to allow most Saints to pass through in their Transcendent forms, but Aiko still managed to close it behind them with the help of her Aspect.

She did have to catch her breath after exerting herself to accomplish that feat, though.

'Ah… should have just asked Ling Ling to close it…'

That would have been the smart thing to do… but Aiko had her pride, as well! And while she was ready and willing to steal candy from children, if need be, asking a little boy for help was a bit too embarrassing.

Instead, she floated Little Ling up and pulled the giggling boy behind her like a balloon while walking up the wide path.

Effie's estate was truly huge — it was an entire park, really, more than spacious enough for her son to run around in his Transcendent form or for her to lie down and relax on the grass in hers. And that was not even counting the Beast Farm hidden in a dimensional Memory usually kept around her husband's neck.

It took Aiko a few minutes to reach the house. Her stiletto heels were not the best fit for the gravel path, so she ended up flying, as well — the two of them rushed through the air, brushing against the treetops, before landing near Effie's porch.

There, a tall and athletic figure was waiting for them, leaning on a wooden beam.

Effie grinned.

"Well, well, well. Hey there, Tinker Bell."

Aiko looked up and gave the vivacious huntress a dirty look.

"Hey yourself, Gargantuanne. Look, I brought your Pantagruel."

Effie looked down… and then a little more down.

"Why thank you, dear Thumbelina. You are so sweet."

Aiko scoffed.

"No need to thank me, Madam Gulliver. It's my pleasure!"

Little Ling looked between them with a confused expression, then said hesitantly:

"Mom… that's Auntie Aiko. Why are you calling her names?"

Effie laughed, then stepped off the porch and bent down to hug Aiko.

"She had no one to blame but herself! Who told you to be so tiny and so cute, huh, Aiko?"

Instead of an answer, Aiko slammed her fist into Effie's ribs.

"You're going to wrinkle my blouse! Let go, you huge menace!"

Effie squeezed her a little tighter instead, though.

"I am not huge… I am comely, curvaceous, and shapely. Why, jealous much?"

Finally, Aiko was set free. Floating away a few steps, she straightened her blazer and gave Effie a glare.

"As if!"

Little Ling giggled.

Looking at the two women — one extremely tall, the other extremely petite — he raised a hand and waved.

"Auntie! Say bye to mom. Mom's gotta go."

Aiko landed on the ground and blinked a couple of times.

"Huh?"

At that moment, Effie coughed.

"Oh. That's right. I have to run."

Aiko frowned in confusion.

"No, wait a minute. What do you mean, you have to run? I've only just got here."

Effie backed away.

"Well, you know how it is. I have to steward the East, and all that. They need me in the Castle… and Ling's Dad is off dealing with the city fields…"

'What?'

Suddenly, a terrible suspicion struck Aiko. She was so agitated by it that her feet left the ground.

"Did… did you lure me here… to be a babysitter?"

Effie was already a few steps away.

"Sorry!"

Aiko was stunned.

She was scandalized.

"Hey, do you know who I am?"

Turning away, Effie grinned.

"Of course I know! You're the best! Love you, have fun!"

A moment later, she was gone, leaving Aiko alone with Little Ling.

Aiko turned her head and looked at the boy in complete shock.

Little Ling smiled and offered her an open palm.

His voice was very serious.

"Let's have fun, Auntie. Also… my gift? Where is it?"

Aiko took a deep breath, then forced out a pale smile.

'I'll… kill her, I think…'

Chapter-2429: Secret Party

Effie's home was more cozy than luxurious, which was not what one would expect from the home of a woman who was ruling over half of all humans in the Dream Realm. But then again, it had been built before Godgrave, and her husband had done most of the building with his own two hands — so, it would have been strange to expect palatial opulence from their residence.

In fact, the home was quite similar to the wooden farmhouse hidden inside the Black Beast Locket — Aiko had been to the Beast Farm many times, so she could attest to that.

Of course, the wood used in the construction and to craft the furniture inside was not at all of the mundane sort. It was in fact much sturdier than any material ever produced on Earth, gathered by Effie and her husband in the haunted woods around the greater Bastion area. Everything here was built to last.

It had to be, considering that there was a Transcendent child running around the house. Parents usually childproofed their homes, but Effie had to do the opposite — she had to make sure that her home was not entirely demolished by her child…

...To partial success.

Aiko had always been a transient person, coming and going easily, so the idea of rooting yourself in one spot seemed a little strange to her. Still, every time she visited Effie, she felt like she could almost understand the allure. Effie had built herself a family, and then built herself a house… then, she added the former to the latter, and made it into a home.

Maybe that was why she was fighting so hard.

In any case, today, Aiko and Little Ling were alone in the large home.

She guided him to the dining room and made the boy sit at the table, then wandered into the adjacent kitchen. Looking around there, she called out:

"So, how have you been, wolfie? Have you been a good boy?"

He swung his legs, waiting impatiently.

"I've been good, Auntie! Oh… but I was a little sad. Mommy was away for a long time this time, because other kids needed her help. She made it back before my birthday party, though! And she brought me a present from the… the… the Western Kadrant. That's Africa! I read about it in a book."

Aiko finally found what she had been looking for. It would be a real tragedy to stain her luxurious clothes, so she put on a white apron and exhaled in satisfaction.

"Read it in a book? Since when do you know how to read, rascal?"

As she emerged from the kitchen, Little Ling gave her a pitying look.

"Auntie Aiko… I am six years old. Of course, I know how to read. I can read books with pictures, and even books without pictures."

He raised his chin proudly, then deflated a little.

"Oh… but only in human language. Runic language is too difficult. So, I still need pictures when reading runes."

Aiko blinked a couple of times.

'Six years is a little too early to know how to read, though… I think? When do children usually start reading?'

She had no idea.

More importantly…

"Huh? Who is teaching you to read in runic language? And why?"

Come to think of it, maybe Little Ling did need to know runes. He

was a carrier of the Spell, after all.

Aiko was suddenly engrossed by the question of how the little boy interacted with the Spell, to begin with. Did it show him runes, even? How would it translate the runes to people who could not read? Would it show them a series of images, instead, or simply narrate every word? Would they simply understand the meaning of the runes despite not knowing how to decipher letters?

…Was there a way to somehow make money out of this?

Little Ling giggled.

"Grandpa Julius!"

Aiko snapped out of her reverie, feeling a hint of sorrow as the beautiful ringing of illusory coins she was daydreaming about faded away.

"Oh? Who is that?"

The boy smiled, still swinging his legs.

"My tutor. Mommy says Grandpa Julius is the best!"

'Julius, Julius…'

Was he the elderly academic in charge of the entire Dream Realm Education Initiative?

Damn. Effie did not hold back when it came to Little Ling's development, it seemed…

Shaking her head, Aiko smiled and summoned her luxurious leather handbag.

"Well, in any case. Auntie was very sad to miss your birthday, wolfie. Uncle Sunny was very sad, too. So, he prepared you a little gift…"

With that, she opened the bag and started to produce one item after another. They floated into the air as if by magic, landing softly on the table.

First came the ice cream, then the fluffy waffles, fresh strawberries, custard cake with six colorful candles, chocolate pudding, bottles of freshly squeezed juice… more ice cream…

Soon, the entire table was brimming with delicious treats. Placing the last item down, Aiko straightened her apron and smiled.

"Actually, I decided to have a second, secret birthday party — just you and me. Only the bestest of boys get to have one, so here you go. Happy birthday, wolfie!"

Little Ling's eyes were as wide as saucers. She stared at the delicious feast, as if enthralled by it, and then reached for the ice cream with a trembling hand.

Then, however, he stopped and hesitated for a moment.

Seeing that the boy was troubled by something, Aiko raised an eyebrow.

"What's wrong?"

Little Ling lingered for a few moments, then asked in a tentative tone:

"Auntie Aiko… I know that this is a secret party… but can we leave a little cake for mommy? Mommy eats a lot…"

Aiko's lips trembled.

Struggling to maintain a calm expression, she pretended to consider for a while, and then nodded.

"Alright. Your mommy does indeed eat a lot. So, we'll set aside a little bit of this and a little bit of that for her. Then, she can share with your daddy too. How does that sound?"

Little Ling did not hear her, though. He was already busy stuffing his cheeks with treats.

"Shanksh, Auntie Aiho!"

She observed the little boy for a few moments, then sighed and sat

down herself.

Propping up her chin on a hand, Aiko looked at Little Ling lazily and stayed silent. The boy was so engrossed by the ice cream that nothing else seemed to exist for him.

Idle thoughts bounced around her head, until a particular one drew her attention.

'Are we really supposed to stay here all day? When did Effie say she would return?'

In fact, Effie had not mentioned anything about how long Aiko was supposed to watch Ling Ling at all.

And what was the boy supposed to be doing the whole day? Considering that he already had a tutor, it was unlikely that Effie and his dad allowed him to stay idle all the time. She knew they had gently trained him from before he could walk to know how to control his Transcendent strength… he was almost around the age when mundane children went to school now, too.

Of course, there was no school in existence that could handle a little Saint.

Eventually, Aiko's eyes gleamed.

"Hey, wolfie…"

She hesitated for a moment or two, then grinned.

"How about you and I go on an adventure? Well… let's call it an educational trip."

Little Ling raised his head, his face smeared in ice cream and chocolate in equal measure. His eyes widened.

"An educational trip?"

Aiko's grin widened, too.

"Sure, let's call it that. Let Auntie Aiko teach you a thing or two…"

Chapter-2430: Auntie Aiko's Lessons

"Good afternoon, Ms. Aiko… oh? And who is that little fellow by your side?"

"This? Oh, this is Transcendent Ling. Wolfie, say hi."

"Hi, mister!"

"T—transcendent… Ling? Saint Athena's heir?"

"Sure. Why?"

"B—but… why is he with you, Ms. Aiko?"

"Well, why else? I am his favorite auntie. Right, Ling Ling?"

"Right! Auntie Aiko is the best!"

"..."

"So, about the contract we discussed last month. If I remember, the price you insisted on was a little on the heavy side. Something about my lack of credentials?"

"What? No, no… ahaha, that must have been a clerical error. Those darn clerks, always making errors! Obviously, the offer you initially put forward was more than fair, Lady Aiko!"

"It was, wasn't it?"

"Indeed! So… should we redraw the contract right now?"

That one went well.

"I hope you don't mind. This cutie is my close friend's boy… I am rarely in Bastion, so he insisted on following me around."

"Auntie took me on an educational trip!"

"..."

"Excuse me? Are you okay?"

"This is... this is Saint Ling."

"Oh, so you know the rascal!"

"Then… your close friend is…"

"Effie? Ah, sorry. I think you call her Saint Athena here. Or was it War Beast? Raised by Wolves? Steward of the East? Honestly, she has so many titles these days that I get confused."

"Mommy is the best!"

"S—sorry. What can I do for you, my lady? Oh, and for you, venerable Saint Ling?"

"You see, I have heard that your club is very exclusive and only allows people of immaculate standing to become members. My standing is not too notable here in Bastion, so I would not want to impose…"

"No, no! What are you talking about, Lady… Aiko, was it? Please. May I offer you and your young companion some refreshments while I fill out the paperwork? How does VIP membership sound? No, what am I talking about! VVIP membership it is."

"Thank you kindly. Oh, but I did not think you had VVIP members?"

"We do now!"

"How wondeful. What is it, wolfie?"

"Auntie, ask mister if they have ice cream. Ling Ling thinks… that he will be very refreshed if he eats ice cream…"

That one went even better.

"Welcome! How can I help you?"

"Good day. My young friend here kept insisting on getting ice cream."

"Well, you certainly came to the right place. So, would you like to buy our signature ice cream?"

"I would like to buy your ice cream shop."

"...Excuse me?"

"Auntie Aiko! I want pistachio flavor!"

"I see. That will be your ice cream shop and one cone of pistachio ice cream, please. Can I pay in cash?"

That one went wonderfully, too!

Some time later, Aiko and Little Ling were sprawled on a bench in a small park, enjoying two cones of ice cream. The sun was shining high in the sky, and both of them basked in its warmth, tired and deeply satisfied.

Little Ling licked his pistachio ice cream, let out a content sigh, and looked at Aiko.

"Auntie, can I ask you a question?"

Aiko shrugged.

"Sure, go ahead."

The boy considered his words for a moment.

"This was the best educational trip ever, Auntie! But… was it really educational? Grandpa Julius usually gives me lessons, homework, and tests. That's education!"

Aiko smiled faintly.

"Was it educational? Of course, it was! Listen, wolfie… your mom

and dad — and Grandpa Julius as well — can teach you many things at home. But there are some lessons that can only be learned outside. Today, you were supposed to learn one such lesson. Can you tell me what that lesson was?"

Little Ling scrunched his face in concentration, remembering where they had been, whom they had talked to, and how those conversations had gone.

Eventually, he offered in a hesitant tone:

"That everyone… loves mommy?"

Aiko grinned.

"Exactly! The lesson you were supposed to learn today… is that having friends is more important than having money."

Little Ling looked into the distance thoughtfully.

"Oooh…"

Aiko nodded.

"Because if you have the right friends, you can make way more money!"

The boy gave her a dubious look. She bit into her ice cream, enjoyed its smooth texture and rich flavor, then swallowed and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Little Ling stared at her for a moment more, then sighed and looked away.

"Nothing. It's just that… I don't think you're really suited to be a teacher, Auntie."

Aiko looked at him in indignation.

"What? Why?"

The boy sighed again.

"Maybe I should ask Grandpa Julius to give you lessons, too…"

Aiko scoffed.

"Who is going to teach whom? Let me tell you, wolfie… I had the best tutors in NQSC when I was your age. Well, before my family went bankrupt. Money is important — you have to have money to get educated, first!"

She shook her head and looked around.

The neighborhood they were in was close to the lakefront, so she knew it well from before the war. It was close to a ferry station and near one of the main streets, as well — foot traffic here was excellent, and the location offered easy access to several popular landmarks. More than that, one of the runic tramways was set to be built just outside the small park.

That was the reason Aiko had purchased the ice cream shop on the corner. Not only was it going to bring in good income, but having a covert safe house here would be quite convenient for members of the Shadow Clan operating in Bastion.

Granted… the neighborhood had become less picturesque since Aiko left the city. She had never seen graffiti here before, for example, but now several were marring the walls of the surrounding buildings.

Little Ling was staring at one such questionable art piece, as well.

"Auntie Aiko… what letters are those? Auntie Spell is not translating them."

She blinked a couple of times.

'Wha…'

What the hell was he talking about?

"First of all, the Nightmare Spell is not your auntie. It is ancient, so at best, it's your grandma. Grandpa? Anyway, don't put me in the same

category as the Spell, please."

She frowned.

"Secondly, don't go around reading graffiti. Those are usually bad words! What will happen to me if you learn a bad word on my watch? Goodness gracious. Your mom will kill me."

Little Ling blinked a few times and looked at her with wide eyes.

"Auntie Aiko… what are bad words?"

Aiko froze.

"Huh?"

Clutching his melting ice cream, the little boy leaned forward excitedly.

"Bad words. What are they?"

She coughed.

"What, you have never heard a bad word before?"

Little Ling shook his head energetically.

"Nope! But! Now that I know that they exist, I really want to learn! Grandpa Julius says that learning is a noble calling! Will you teach me?!"

Aiko gulped, suddenly feeling cold despite the warm day.

"You… eat your ice cream before it melts, wolfie. Forget I said anything."

'Oh, no…'

Effie was definitely... definitely going to kill her.

Chapter-2431: City Gates

The last stop Aiko decided to make was on the outskirts of the city, far away from the lake.

She and Little Ling rode an open carriage pulled by an Echo, the driver sitting on the bench in a relaxed pose. The boy was looking around curiously, having spent most of his life close to the lake — the street they were following was one of the main thoroughfares of Bastion, cutting all the way from the shore to the city gates. There were plenty of fascinating sights.

The gates themselves were not very impressive, though — in fact, there was no gate at all, just a wide open space where the departing caravans gathered before embarking on the dangerous journey across the dire reaches of the Dream Realm, and where the battered arriving caravans stopped.

Some of the caravans carried settlers, some carried cargo. Out of the latter, some were loaded with necessary resources that the Domain supplied to periphery cities in the East, while some belonged to entrepreneurial merchants.

Servicing the caravans was an industry in and of itself. So, a lively bazaar had grown around the gate, with countless stalls, plentiful inns, and shops of all kinds. In fact, the Bazaar was a little town in and of itself, with many people living here on a permanent basis.

On both sides of the non-existent gate, tall walls separated Bastion from the wild expanse beyond… the walls were tall, but not very impressive either. In truth, they were barely more than mounds of compressed earth — that was because the construction was still in process, and this was merely a temporary measure.

Bastion was a vast city, and on top of that, it was situated in the Dream Realm — which might have been settled by humans, but not

at all tamed. As a result, securing it was a titanic undertaking. The construction of the city wall was of paramount importance, but it was taking time.

Humans were no strangers to constructing great barriers around their cities, but this was not the waking world with its sophisticated technology and expansive infrastructure. Building anything in the Dream Realm was much harder because people did not have powerful machines, automated factories, and enormous smelting plants here.

Instead, though, they had Awakened, Masters, and Saints — which was why building a wall around a city as sprawling as Bastion was even possible.

No two Awakened were the same, though, so the walls of Bastion were a bit strange. Some of the sections had been built out of compressed earth, some out of stone, some out of wood or metal. Some were even composed of countless trunks of towering trees that had fused together, while some were made of thorns and brambles.

A small army of Awakened patrolled the walls day and night, and a larger army of builders was still hard at work turning them into an impregnable fortification.

"Woooow…"

Little Ling took in the lively sight of the bazaar with wide eyes.

"So many people! And those Echoes! Wow!"

Disembarking from the carriage, Aiko offered him her hand and smiled.

"Lots of scents, yes? Don't get overwhelmed."

The boy sniffed the air a few times and beamed.

"Yummy! Yummy yummy yummy! Auntie Aiko, can we eat?!"

She nodded seriously.

"Of course! In a bit…"

With that, she looked around the bazaar herself.

While Little Ling was busy discerning the most delicious scent, Aiko turned to the carriage driver and pointed to one of the buildings nearby.

"A new inn? Since when was it here?"

'Such a prime spot…'

The driver shook his head.

"That one is not an inn."

Aiko gave him a strange look.

The man was exceedingly handsome and held himself with gallant poise — it was quite strange to see someone so... distinguished... driving an Echo carriage, to say the least.

She let out a mental sigh.

Well, of course the driver was handsome, gallant, and dreamy. He was Master Quentin, after all.

Aiko knew that if something happened, Little Ling would be able to defend himself better than she could. Nothing really compared with the strength of a Transcendent, child or not, while she was a measly Awakened. Still, she was not going to take Effie's precious son out on the town without reliable protection.

So, Quentin had been demoted to a carriage driver for a day, taking them around Bastion since morning.

Of course, the man did not complain.

Reminding herself that he was taken, Aiko suppressed the impulse to bat her eyelashes at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Quentin nodded.

"It's a church."

She frowned slightly.

"You mean one of those weird meditation halls where people definitely do not pray to Nephis?"

He chuckled.

"No, this one is an actual church. Church of the Moon, or something like that. It's a tiny cult… these guys are mostly harmless, too. They used to be a bunch of wanderers, traveling with caravans and offering blessings for safe journeys. Things seem to be looking up for them, though, considering that they've been able to buy this building."

Aiko blinked a few times.

"Church of the Moon? As in, they worship Beast God? The dead one?"

Quentin shook his head.

"No, they just worship the moon. If you ask me, traveling and guidance is more of a Storm God thing… but I am not well-versed in inventing religions, so what do I know?"

Aiko studied the modest church, which did not look any more opulent than the surrounding inns, and pursed her lips.

"Shame. I had my eyes on that location. Gods, these weirdos really do grow like mushrooms… where are they all coming from, anyway? I have never even heard about cults being a thing before."

Quentin nodded.

"The government used to be strict about it. Plus, it is not easy to muster religious zeal in a world where gods are dead, and the Nightmare Spell exists… but things are different now. Lady Nephis was right to share the truth of what fate awaits Earth with the people, but not everyone can bear the weight of truth. So, people are

turning to all kinds of things to soothe their fear. Granted…"

He turned and looked at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Island drifting high in the sky above the city.

"Most are turning to Immortal Flame. Why believe in anything else if there is a literal goddess looking over you from above?"

Aiko nodded.

'Well, or an eccentric demigod looking up at you from the shadows…'

She gave Quentin a long look.

"Still. This Church of the Moon… did you make a report about it?"

He smiled faintly.

"There are too many tiny sects popping up here and there these days to make an individual report on each one. We've been compiling information to make a batch report after the solstice, though, when things calm down a little."

Aiko nodded again.

"Good. I want to know everything there is to know about these 'harmless cultists'. You know what's at stake."

Quentin studied her for a bit, then sighed.

"Lady Aiko… you know, it would be much easier on us if we knew what it is that we are looking out for, exactly."

She shook her head and looked away.

"Some things are too dangerous to know. And some things become more dangerous the more people know about them. There is a reason why Boss is keeping everyone in the dark, so just trust his judgment."

Aiko knew more than most, but even she had not been told everything. The threat Changing Star and the Lord of Shadow seemed so wary of was apparently of a kind that should never be spoken

about aloud.

"Auntie Aiko! Look! Look!"

Little Ling pulled on her hand, pointing to the road excitedly.

There, a battered caravan was approaching the city.

Aiko smiled faintly.

'Finally…'

Chapter-2432: Dream Realm Caravan

Seeing a caravan coming in was always impressive, which was why Aiko had taken Ling Ling to the bazaar for the last stop of their little adventure.

"Wow!"

The boy was properly entranced.

The Dream Realm was vast, and the network of roads between the nascent human cities was in its infant state. More than that, the wilderness teemed with Nightmare Creatures and horrors of all kinds, so it took preparation and great effort to reach the destination unscathed… or even reach it at all.

The situation was somewhat better in the West, where the River of Tears served as a medium connecting the Citadels in its basin, but here in the East, the caravans had to be formidable forces to brave the dreadful expanse of the Dream Realm.

Out there in front of the city, a long chain of massive Echoes was moving slowly across the rugged terrain. Each was as tall as a building — the leading beast was especially impressive, towering above the rest, with scarlet scales covering its body and three long horns crowning its massive head.

The Echoes were clad in heavy armor, each pulling an enormous wagon behind them. The wagons themselves were heavily armored, as well, resembling rolling fortresses. Their great wheels crushed the soil as they turned, and seasoned Awakened warriors kept watch on the battlements, bearing scars of countless battles.

The wagons bore countless scars, too — some old, some new. Their

armor was bent and battered, torn in some places, with the enchanted wood beneath splintered and charred. The Awakened warriors were covered in dust and dirt, their weariness and exhaustion palpable even from a distance.

Even the Echoes seemed fatigued, the massive chains connecting them to the wagons rattling dully.

Still, it was an amazing sight to behold, especially for a child.

"Auntie Aiko! These Echoes are even bigger than me! Oh… I wonder how heavy those wagons are! Do you think I can pull one?!"

Aiko looked at Little Ling with a smile.

"Wolfie… let's not talk about your potential career as a wolf of burden, alright? I doubt that your mom will be happy to learn that her precious baby is dreaming about running away with a caravan to pull wagons. In fact, she might take my head clean off my shoulders if she does… and I want to keep my head firmly attached to my body, thank you very much."

Little Ling giggled.

"Auntie... mommy doesn't have to know, does she?"

Aiko stared at him in shock and outrage.

'What, he knows how to lie now?!'

Who taught him?! Which lowlife was being a bad influence on this pure, innocent boy?!

She was going to bankrupt them!

"Your mom might not know, but Auntie Cassie will know. She knows everything, so be a good boy and never lie to your mother!"

Aiko huffed in indignation.

Little Ling looked at her and grinned.

"Should I tell her about how we convinced that one uncle to sign an ex-clue-see-wity contract with you today, Auntie?"

She cleared her throat and turned away.

"...On second thought, what Effie doesn't know can't hurt her. Your mommy is a very busy person, so we shouldn't burden her with every little detail, should we?"

She raised her hand and hastily pointed forward.

"Look! They're approaching!"

The caravan reached the vicinity of the city. The massive Echoes stopped, and the wagons came to a halt. The entire bazaar suddenly boiled, countless people rushing forward to witness the arrival — since everyone here made a living by servicing the caravans, this was the moment they had been waiting for.

No one rushed to leave the boundary of the city, though. First, the arriving caravan had to be inspected with the help of special Memories and sorcerous tools.

It did not take very long, though. Eventually, the guards finished their task and let the tired travelers through. The wagons were brought to the empty space in front of the gates, the Echoes were dismissed, and the long process of unloading the cargo began.

In the chaotic mess that followed, Aiko found an imposing man in monster hide armor and waved elegantly at him.

The man was a Master and the owner of the returned caravan. He had been discussing something with a few of his subordinates, but shooed them away when Aiko approached.

His low, confident voice sounded a little surprised:

"Miss Aiko? I thought our meeting was not until tomorrow. I did not expect you to meet us personally."

She smiled.

"Well, I happened to be in the neighborhood. Why put off something for tomorrow when it can be done today, right?"

The man lingered for a while, then looked at Little Ling in confusion.

"And this is?"

Aiko maintained a polite expression.

"Oh, this? This is Saint Ling… my dear friend's offspring. Wolfie, say hi to Uncle."

Little Ling grimaced and turned his nose away.

"I don't wanna. This mister smells funny."

Aiko's smile turned a little forced.

"Ling Ling! Don't be rude. Also, don't just go around sniffing people!"

The little boy just shrugged unhappily.

She studied him for a few moments, then turned to the caravan Master.

"Please forgive his manners. He is usually well-behaved… you know, when he's at home. With his mom. Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves. Steward of the East. Oh, what was I talking about? Right, the special cargo you delivered — I am ready to take it off your hands right away. Let's say… a thousand soul shards?"

The man studied Little Ling for a moment or two, then smiled widely.

"What a boisterous boy. Sorry, kid… I've been on the road for months. You know what they say about the smell of adventure? Well, it's more of a stench, really. You get used to it, though."

Then, he looked at Aiko and nodded.

"A thousand soul shards sounds about right. Shall we sign the documents?"

Aiko's smile froze.

She glanced at Little Ling, then back at the caravan Master.

After remaining silent for a few moments, she chuckled.

"Why, of course. Time is money, right? Ah, but before that. I wanted to show you something…"

She raised her hand, summoning a Memory.

At the same time, she moved her fingers to form a shadow sign.

Some distance away, Quentin's eyes suddenly turned sharp.

'Little Ling not liking his smell was already suspicious enough…'

Aiko maintained a relaxed expression.

'...but a merchant who doesn't haggle? Ring the alarm!'

Something was very, very wrong with this Master.

Chapter-2433: Swindling a Horror

The Caravan Master — whoever or whatever he was — shifted his gaze, looking at the Memory forming on Aiko's hand curiously.

"That is an unusual Memory, Miss Aiko."

Indeed. While most Memories formed from sparks of light, some were different. The Memories crafted by the spellsmiths of Fallen Valor, for example, manifested in a whirlwind of scarlet sparks instead. There were stranger ones out there, as well, even among those Memories bestowed upon Awakened by the Spell. Those were usually quite special, albeit not always more potent than the rest.

The Memories crafted by the Lord of Shadows after his supposed death, however, always appeared like a torrent of darkness.

Aiko smiled.

"Well, you know how the Spell is. It likes to be fancy sometimes."

The Caravan Master chuckled and looked at her with the same curious smile.

"Indeed I do. We, merchants, have to know these matters by heart — people assign additional value to the strangest things, after all. A flashy Memory can cost ten times the price despite not offering any additional benefits. I prefer my Memories powerful rather than flamboyant, personally… but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't want to get my hands on a couple of the latter, and sell them for a fortune."

He laughed.

Aiko's smile was a little forced by then.

The Caravan Master… seemed perfectly human.

That was the creepiest part, really. How flawlessly he blended with the crowd, no different from any other person she had met.

But Aiko was convinced that he was not, in fact, human. That was what made her skin crawl more than encountering the creature itself did.

"But what Memory are you so eager to show me? You… wouldn't be summoning a weapon, would you, Miss Aiko?"

There was no threat in his voice, and yet, Aiko suddenly felt cold.

She raised an eyebrow.

"A weapon? Goodness gracious, surely not. What am I going to do with a weapon in these heels?"

She wasn't lying, either.

Her stilettos were indeed not what one would want to wear in a fierce battle. Granted, Aiko could float and fly as she wished, so that wasn't an issue…

Still — she was a lover, not a fighter.

Well... the "lover" part wasn't going so well for her, to be honest, but that was beyond the point.

'Who cares? I love money! Now that's true romance...'

Finally, a hand mirror made of polished silver appeared in her hand. It was quite a stylish little accessory, etched with beautiful patterns and inlaid with finely carved pieces of obsidian.

The Caravan Master studied it carefully.

"Not a weapon, after all."

He looked at her and smiled.

"Still… it seemed that I've been discovered. How vexing. I thought I performed the role of this human well. I even came while the Star is gone, and the Shadow it casts is gone with her."

Aiko shivered.

'Not a human, then.'

Her suspicion, unfortunately, had turned out to be correct.

'How did this thing pass the inspection, dammit?!'

What stood in front of her was not the Ascended merchant she had been supposed to meet. Instead… it was a vessel of the Great Terror, Skinwalker.

The forces of humanity were currently locked in a losing war against the abominable creature in the Eastern Quadrant, where it was supposed to be contained. The fact that a vessel of Skinwalker had made it all the way to Bastion, past every countermeasure put in place to prevent just that eventuality…

Was concerning.

Actually, it was terrifying.

Aiko forced out a smile.

"Whatever do you mean?"

With her other hand, she pulled Little Ling closer.

The vessel of Skinwalker studied her for a few moments, then smiled politely.

"I am curious. How did you see through my charade?"

Aiko felt an impulse to mock the abomination, even if she was powerless in front of it.

She could have told him how Little Ling had disliked his scent, and more importantly, how he completely failed to understand what kind

of people merchants were… in front of Aiko of the Shadow Clan, of all people!

The harrowing creature had been steadily improving its ability to mimic human behavior, cunningly making one countermeasure invented to contain it after another meaningless — but it still failed to truly fathom what it meant to be human.

It couldn't. All Skinwalker could do was imitate humans while not truly understanding what it was imitating… in a sense, it did the opposite of what the practitioners of Shadow Dance were supposed to do. Not that there were many of those, even with all the training...

In any case, Aiko really wanted to gloat.

But why would she explain what exactly it was that the Skinwalker had done wrong to the creepy bastard? So that it could learn from its mistakes and perform better next time?

'Yeah, no. I am not giving this thing a heroic monologue. After all, I am not a hero. I am... a babysitter. For today.'

Little Ling hugged Aiko, sensing that there was something wrong. Some distance away, Quentin was cautiously making his way toward them.

Returning the Skinwalker's smile, she looked at her hand mirror.

"Let me finish explaining about this Memory first. I summoned it for a reason, you know?"

She turned the mirror this way and that, casting bright reflections on the cobblestones.

"This here is a prototype of a Memory my boss has been developing in his free time. Communication is a serious problem in the Dream Realm, actually. Sure, the Immortal Flame is already working on a solution — a Dreamscape for the Dream Realm, or some such. Making it safe from all the horrors of this world is proving to be a problem in and of itself, though. Hence, we came up with our own solution. Ah, if only there was a way to mass-produce them! But I am getting off topic."

The vessel of the Skinwalker tilted its head.

"Communication? Are you hoping to commune with me, Awakened? Unity… community… yes…"

Aiko coughed.

"Thanks… but you are not my type, sorry. Sadly, it's not like I can do anything against you, can I? I mean, I am a mere Awakened, and you are a Great Terror. What am I supposed to do? Oh, but I do feel the need to inform you of something."

She pointed to Little Ling, who was clinging to her.

"This here is my dear friend's child. And my friend is a real she-wolf when it comes to protecting her boy. Coincidentally, today, we learned that everyone in this city loves his mom very much. Do you know why? Because she is Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves, Steward of the East... the War Beast. You should know her well, considering how many of your vessels she has destroyed."

Aiko drew Little Ling closer and covered his eyes with her hand.

Then, she smiled brilliantly.

"Right, returning to the Memory. It has a really terrible name, so I'll spare you the pain of hearing it. I mean… I am perfectly capable of coming up with a terrible name of my own! Today, let's call it…"

Aiko paused for a moment and then said in a solemn tone:

"...Call Mommy."

And just as she did, something thundered in the sky above them.

Chapter-2434: The Terrible Price of Saving the World

Aiko had not been bluffing when she said that she had no use for a weapon. She was neither a warrior nor had any ambition of becoming one… but that did not mean that she was harmless.

After all, she was also a former member of the Dreamer Army. She had survived the Forgotten Shore, and it was not by accident.

'What, did you think that running a gambling den in the damn Bright Castle was a laidback occupation?'

It certainly hadn't been.

...The Memory Aiko had summoned was a communication mirror the members of the Shadow Clan used when on missions. It allowed them to talk to each other remotely... or listen in on conversations if the mirror was hidden in some dark place in advance. Not that there weren't better ways of eavesdropping on people.

Of course, Aiko did not really need the mirror to get in touch with Effie and inform her of the dire situation they were in — Cassie would already know, which meant that Effie had already been informed.

It was a little creepy, to know that Cassie could be watching her at any given moment — but in rare cases like this one, it was also comforting. If anything, Aiko could feel honored that she was a high-priority mark among countless people the blind seer was using as her eyes.

In any case, Aiko needed the silver mirror for a different reason. Apart from allowing those who possessed them to communicate, the mirrors were also able to reflect what was in front of them over a

distance. The other person just needed to have a matching Memory, which Effie did.

Aiko's boss had woven that particular enchantment in a moment of petty vindictiveness, mumbling something about "stealing that bastard's tricks" in an unhinged tone. She had an inkling of who the aforementioned bastard was, and sometimes wondered what the poor man had done to get on her boss's naughty list.

It had to be something major, considering that dropping a Cursed Demon on his head did not seem to have satisfied Sunny.

What mattered at the moment, though, was that Aiko could use the mirror to reflect her surroundings to Effie. In other words, what she wanted to relay was not a warning that they were in trouble.

…It was targeting data.

Countless kilometers away, at the top of the great castle, Raised by Wolves had turned north and summoned her spear. Then, she took careful aim, and tossed it into the sky with a low roar.

A hurricane rose, ripping the flags hoisted above the keep to shreds and making people cower.

While Aiko was talking to the vessel of the Skinwalker, the spear was tearing up the sky. It crossed the distance a mundane human would have needed days to cross on foot in less than a minute.

By the time it arrived, Aiko had already covered Little Ling's eyes with a hand.

It was not out of fear of the Skinwalker…

Rather, it was because a little boy had no business seeing what would happen next.

As something thundered above them, the vessel of the Great Terror looked up...

That was the last thing it ever did.

When the spear fell from the sky, striking the former Caravan Master with flawless precision, it did not simply pierce his body.

Instead, his body was simply pulverized, turning into a cloud of fine crimson haze.

The spear pierced the cobblestones next, causing a small earthquake to rattle the bazaar and sending a deep fracture running from the point where its tip struck the ground to the great wagons of the battered caravan. One of them tilted when its armored wheel exploded into a storm of splinters, and then toppled with a deafening groan.

The walls of the little church Quentin had mentioned cracked.

Far away, above the lake, swift figures were already leaping from the emerald meadows of the Ivory Island — those were the Fire Keepers, rushing to the city gates. Of course, Effie was probably going to arrive much sooner.

There was no telling if this vessel of the Skinwalker was the only one that had avoided detection, after all. Any member of the caravan could be a disguised abomination...

No. Actually, the Skinwalker had accidentally revealed its ability to evade the sorcery that had been keeping it out of human Citadels so far, which meant that anyone in Bastion could be a vessel.

Anyone in any of the human cities in the Dream Realm could, in fact.

So, every human city was going to undergo a period of instability. Martial law would have to be enforced until a new form of sorcery was developed… then, the cities had to be sweeped, and any vessel discovered as a result would have to be eliminated...

All because Aiko had decided to take Ling Ling on a little adventure.

And although she did not know it yet, in the coming weeks, several hidden Skinwalker infestations would indeed be discovered in remote Citadels of the eastern reaches of the Dream Realm. Luckily, they would be eradicated before the malignant Terror could really grow, thus preventing a terrible calamity.

Aiko might not have stumbled into saving the world… but what she had done was not that far off from such a feat.

'Damn it. I just wanted to have fun on my day off.'

She looked down in dejection.

...Then, her eyes widened in horror.

"Oh, no!"

Her beautiful shoes! Some of the pulverized Skinwalker vessel had splattered on them!

They were ruined.

"Damnation!"

It was a terrible loss.

Still unable to see anything because his eyes were covered, Little Ling asked stirred:

"Huh? What's a damnation, Auntie?"

She bit her lip, then said in a teary tone:

"What? N—nothing! Forget you heard anything!"

Little Ling grew quiet for a moment, then shifted, trying to get out of her embrace.

"Is damnation one of those bad words? It is, isn't it?"

Aiko paled.

"I said forget it, wolfie! You didn't hear anything!"

He dropped his shoulder.

"Alright, Auntie. I... already forgot it."

As she pulled him away toward the carriage and gave Quentin a

poignant look, Little Ling sighed and added:

"I really can't remember. Damnation! My memory has gone bad…"

Chapter-2435: Full Moon

Remembering something he already knew was a strange experience, but Sunny was more rattled by learning all over again what Aiko had done at the gates of Bastion.

He gritted his teeth.

'Aiko… taught Little Ling a curse word?!'

What was she thinking about?!

Granted, she had also uncovered a dire truth about the Skinwalker, plunged the entire Human Domain into the jaws of martial law for a couple of weeks, and prevented multiple cities from either sustaining terrible losses or falling entirely… but that was beside the point!

'He's only six, for Spell's sake! What kind of vulgar good-for-nothings is she hanging around with, to use strong language in front of a child?!'

He seethed for a few moments, then took a deep breath and shook his head.

'No, it doesn't matter. I'll deal with Aiko later — there are more urgent matters I must attend to at the moment…'

Grimacing, Sunny nodded with determination and continued on his way.

He only took a few steps, though, when another memory came to the surface of his mind.

Sunny froze.

"Nephis did wh… actually, never mind. That is exactly what Nephis would do. Why am I even surprised?"

Letting out a hollow chuckle, Sunny looked up and then resumed walking.

"So, she went fishing in the lake without me, huh? How heartless…"

***

Several weeks earlier, Nephis was sitting at the edge of the Ivory Island, watching a sea of stars shimmer in the dark sky above Bastion.

Tonight, just like the previous night, parts of the city were illuminated by the glow of electric street lights. She was glad to see her people taking another step toward prosperity here in the Dream Realm… but because of it, the stars seemed dimmer than they had been before.

That filled her with a faint sense of regret.

…The stars might have become more distant, but the pale disc of the full moon slowly traveling across the surface of the tranquil lake looked closer than it had ever been before.

Tonight was the third and last night when the full moon would rise above Bastion this month. For these three nights, sailing on the lake was forbidden, and people were kept away from its shore…

That was because when the full moon rose, the boundary between reality and illusion grew thin here in Bastion, and the horror imprisoned in the ruins of the true castle strained to exert its abominable influence from beyond the reflections.

So, Nephis had to stay in the city during the full moon to guard it. Strangely enough, for her, these three perilous nights were usually a time of rest and recuperation. She spent most of her time on the battlefield, leading the forces of humanity against the tide of nightmares threatening to swallow them all.

Despite the hidden presence of a Cursed Demon, the sight of a full moon promised peace and serenity.

Granted… she wasn't used to spending these moonlit nights alone.

Sunny was usually with her, either by her side or hiding in her shadow. Nephis had grown used to his presence without even knowing it — now that he was gone, his absence felt strangely unnatural.

She was surprised to find herself missing him, even if he had only been gone for a day.

'Who would have thought I'd find myself feeling these emotions one day?'

It was strange, indeed. Not at all like her.

But it wasn't an unwelcome feeling. In fact, the sweet pain of missing someone made her feel hopeful. It made her believe that there was some life left, still, in her scorched and arid heart.

So, she tried to enjoy the unfamiliar sense of faint melancholy.

Sunny had been forced to leave because of unforeseen — albeit not entirely unexpected — complications in Ravenheart. The incarnation he had sent there, as well as Kai, were now missing. More than that, a Cursed Tyrant and two Beasts had escaped a prison made for them by the Demon of Dread… only to end up in another moments later, thanks to Seishan's quick thinking.

Nobody knew what would escape the eerie jade board next, though, so the Sovereigns had to make their way to the Jade Palace. Sunny had gone first, taking Cassie with him. Nephis herself was going to join them once the full moon was over.

'Tomorrow…'

Tomorrow, she would see him again.

Looking at the reflection of the moon shining on the surface of the lake, Nephis wondered if she would feel something then.

Would she be happy? Or simply pleased?

Would she feel nothing at all?

Would the strange sorrow in her heart go away?

At that moment, the waters below rippled.

The pale disc suddenly seemed distorted and eerie, gazing at her from below like a round eye plagued by a white cataract.

The lake stirred, and a series of waves rolled outward, climbing higher and higher up the shore.

Nephis tilted her head, watching it all transpire somberly.

'So, it chose tonight to show its hand.'

What an unfortunate coincidence it was… so unfortunate, in fact, that Nephis was inclined to believe that it was no coincidence at all.

Had the Cursed Demon waited until only one of the Sovereigns was left in the city to try and escape?

In any case, the timing could not have been worse.

Humanity was drowning in calamities, surrounded by peril and enemies on all sides.

In the waking world, more and more Gates were opening each month, and the population centers were barely holding on against the flood of Nightmare Creatures.

The Eastern Quadrant was balancing on the verge of an utter disaster. The war against the Skinwalker was not going well — the infection was spreading, and humans had to retreat further and further, abandoning their land, settlements, and entire cities.

In the Dream Realm, the hunt for new Citadels was proving to be less fruitful than she had hoped. Legions of Awakened were clearing the interior of the two vast enclaves from abominations while simultaneously exploring the far reaches to the east, the frozen hells to the west, and the horrid waters of the misty ocean to the south… while in the north, a legion of shadows was doing the same in the scorched tangle of a burned forest.

Mordret's location was still unknown. Asterion still remained a worrisome mystery.

And now, this…

All of this was pressing down on Nephis, pushing her to the ground. The weight of the entire world... two worlds, even... was resting on her shoulders, making her struggle to keep herself from falling to her knees.

And then there were the quiet whispers of the countless souls burning like stars in the vast expanse of her Domain. Their longing washed over her day and night, its pressure even more overwhelming... unbearable, at times.

Nephis pursed her lips.

Sunny was not by her side. Neither was Cassie. Kai was missing, and Effie had gone to the Western Quadrant to deal with the Category Four Gate crisis there. Jet had taken the Night Garden to the cradle of humanity, as well, and was sailing toward the Eastern Quadrant.

There was no one Nephis could trust to have her back in a battle against a Cursed Demon here in Bastion… not tonight, at least.

So…

She would have to face it alone.

She would have to carry the weight and keep walking forward, one arduous step at a time.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Nephis slowly stood up and looked at the dark lake with white flames dancing in her eyes.

Two beautiful white wings manifested behind her, chasing away the darkness of the night.

"...It is just a Cursed Demon."

What was there to worry about?

An aloof, distant smile twisted her lips.

Summoning the Blessing, she took a step forward and plunged into the darkness.

Chapter-2436: Lost Heaven

A bright star ignited in the dark sky above Bastion. The people — those of them who were still on the streets, busy with fruitful endeavors or simply being festive after a hard day of work — looked up in surprise, their eyes igniting with wonder.

The star fell from the sky, growing bigger and brighter. Soon enough, it was like a flaming white meteor plummeting from the lightless heavens to the ground. Its light illuminated the night, chasing the darkness away and making the full moon shining high above seem pale in comparison.

The silver radiance of the moon could not compete with the incinerating white glow of the falling star. The night could not compete with it, either.

For a moment, it was as if the sun had risen above Bastion in the middle of the night, bringing with itself the stark beauty of daylight.

Then, before people had the time to get scared, the flaming white meteor struck the surface of the lake.

There was a blinding flash, and a colossal fountain of boiling water rose into the air, evaporating into a vast cloud as it did. The entire lake shone for a moment, as if illuminated from within, and then grew dark once more.

Just like that, the falling star disappeared without a trace.

The waters of the lake surged and rippled, its surface growing restless — the perfect disc of the full moon reflected on its surface was shattered and erased, replaced by scattered fragments of silver light.

…On the other side of the reflection, Nephis shot out from the dark abyss of the lake and soared into the eerie sky of the True Bastion,

her radiant wings unfolding to shine blindingly in the pale radiance of the shattered moon.

She rose high above the vast ruins of the great castle, looking down as white flames danced in her eyes, suffused her skin, and licked her hair. Her fiery gaze felt cold and ruthless… there was no mercy in that gaze, no hesitation, no doubt, no hope of salvation.

Just a firm and inescapable promise of being burned to ash by the boundless tide of purifying flames.

She regarded the ruins of True Bastion dispassionately.

The broken castle had been reduced to rubble by the battle between Morgan and Mordret. The lake, which had run dry as a result of their drawn-out confrontation, was full of water once again, shimmering eerily in the silver light of the shattered moon. Deep cracks ran through the mountain on which the ruins of the castle lay, full of stagnant water and overgrown with scarlet moss.

There was a creature waiting for her in the heart of the ruins.

A shapeless mountain of grey flesh towered above the rubble, covered by moss and brimming with a hundred revolting limbs that rose from it like a dreadful forest. A terrifying, eerie presence emanated from the hideous creature, making the light of the moon seem reluctant to touch it.

As a result, the creature was surrounded by a shroud of darkness. The winds avoided it, as well, so nothing disturbed the dead silence enveloping the ruins. It was as if the world itself was trying to escape it, revolted and frightened by the ancient fiend.

As Nephis looked, countless monstrous eyes suddenly revealed themselves on the grey mass of the Cursed Demon, opening to look back at her with a chilling, terrifyingly alien lack of emotion.

She held its gaze for a few long moments, then folded her wings and dove to the ground.

Landing on the edge of the water, some distance away from the abomination, Nephis took a deep breath and then headed in its

direction with steady steps.

Something strange happened then, though…

There was a rustle, as if the ruins themselves let out a long sigh, and then, a distant voice resounded from the depths of the crumbling castle.

"I had a dream…"

The voice spoke in a long-forgotten language, sounding eerily human despite its low and otherworldly timbre.

Nephis continued to walk, her expression never changing.

The voice spoke again, full of indescribable, faint emotion:

"I dreamt… of being whole again."

The countless monstrous eyes moved slightly, peering into her soul.

"I dreamt of the sun being kind again."

An eerie note found its way into the distant voice, making the world shiver.

"I dreamt of having wings again."

The dreadful forest of skeletal limbs stirred, blackened and charred.

"You are not the one who forced that hateful dream upon me. You are not the one who stole it from me, either… are you?"

Nephis continued to walk, offering no answer.

"And yet, I cannot forgive you. Those wings of yours... so beautiful..."

The monstrous eyes of the Cursed Demon grew darker, and its voice grew cold and insidious, full of malice so vast that it made Nephis halt for a moment.

"Blood of the Sun. Have you come to burn me?"

The mountain of grey flesh moved, rippling as pieces of ancient stone turned to dust under its enormous weight.

A hollow, mad, terrifying laughter resounded above the ruins.

"Shall I extinguish you, then? Or shall I curse you? Shall I tell you how the Sun was destroyed, how our heavens burned, how the land of the Moon was swallowed by ash… how we all fell, one after another? Shall I help you become everlasting, ever-changing?"

The voice whispered then, growing feeble and faint:

"Like me…"

Walking forward with a sword in her hand, Nephis responded evenly:

"I am not interested in talking to you, abomination. Why waste our breaths?"

The blade of the Blessing shone with a blinding light, turning white-hot and incandescent.

"All I am interested in is ending you. So… prepare to die."

Raising her sword, Nephis pointed it at the Cursed Demon.

She was a Supreme Titan whose Domain encompassed billions of souls. This creature... was an old, broken, fallen god.

What right did it have to curse her?

A bitter smile twisted her lips.

"Yes, I have come to burn you. I've come to destroy you... unlike mine, your pain will be swift. Be thankful."

Chapter-2437: Abjuration

Nephis had grown vastly more powerful after attaining Supremacy. However, there was nuance to that newfound power — not all of it came easily, and not all of it could be used freely in any situation.

Take her Supreme Aspect Ability, for example. Sunny had gained the Ability to summon the shades that rested within him into existence, thus becoming a walking army... an army of indestructible shadows that grew with each living being he slayed, no less, which made him a truly terrifying existence.

Nephis had gained an immensely powerful Ability, as well. However, her Supreme Ability did nothing to empower Nephis herself — instead, it empowered the subjects of her Domain, allowing her to heal and empower them with her flames from a distance.

Which was why it was truly unfortunate that she had to face the Cursed Demon alone... not that there were many people out there who could have assisted her in a battle against a Cursed abomination.

...But, of course, she was never alone — not really.

Her Domain encompassed all of humanity, after all.

Not every mundane human was a part of it, but most were. Among the Awakened, meanwhile, only those of the Shadow Clan or those exiled to the penitentiary Citadel in Godgrave did not belong to her Domain — the rest of them were tied to Nephis, either by their own longing or by being anchored to the Gateways her Transcendent vassals controlled.

Or maybe it was her who was tied to them.

She could feel them all, always. The flames of their yearning were like countless stars shining in an abyss of boundless darkness, all

connected to her soul by strings of starlight. Some stars were distant and cold, so small as to almost be non-existent — the others were like enormous bonfires, burning so brightly that their radiance was blinding, and their passion filled the abyss with warmth.

There were too many stars in her Domain for Nephis to fathom them all individually, but drowning in their collective enormity was all too easy. Sometimes, she struggled to remember where her own identity ended and their vastness began… in those moments, the same things that had helped her sustain her humanity helped her maintain her sense of self.

Her True Name... the precious bonds she had forged with other people... the affection she held in her heart.

And most importantly, her own ardent desire... her own longing.

Her goal.

It was strange, really — before, Nephis had been wary of losing her humanity. But now, she was wary of experiencing too much of humanity… all of it, maybe. Of dissolving into the immensity of her Domain completely, becoming an elemental force as opposed to a person.

Perhaps that was how the gods had felt.

Perhaps that was what being a god meant…

A true Apotheosis.

If so, Nephis wanted nothing to do with it.

An element was mighty like a force of nature, but it did not have direction. It did not have conviction. It did not have will.

It did not have what it took to achieve what she desired.

Walking toward the Cursed Demon, she infused her will with her desire, forging an unbreakable armor out of it.

'I am not alone. This creature, though… this creature is alone, and it

will die alone, cut down by my sword and burned by my flame.'

Every day, new stars ignited in the starlit vastness of her Domain.

And every day, some of them were extinguished forever.

Nephis felt the loss of these stars faintly. There were too many of them to mourn the loss of each individual flame, but she was always aware of how many fates were being broken and ground into dust by the ruthless world of the Nightmare Spell.

How many hopes and dreams were doomed to stay forever unfulfilled.

She suffered the pain of their passing personally.

As the Cursed Demon stirred and surged forward, its long limbs pulling the grotesque mountain of grey flesh across the rubble with stunning speed, Nephis took that pain and infused it into her Will, forging an uncompromising sword out of it.

She felt the Cursed Demon's own Will reshaping the world around them…

Trying to reshape Nephis herself, as well.

By then, she already knew what this fallen god was, and what power it wielded.

There were clues for her to piece together, already. The Cursed Demon came from the Hollows of Godgrave, where it had hidden from the annihilating sun for thousands of years. There were hints in what the creature had told her, too — its memories of a gentle sun, of having wings… it scorched, skeletal limbs…

But Nephis did not have to guess what her enemy was.

Because one of the brightest stars in her Domain was Cassie, and while the two of them were far apart, her friend was still with her, seeing things that no other human could.

The Cursed Demon could be called… Abjuration.

It wielded the power of rejection, renouncement, and negation.

Anything it denied had no choice but to cease, and everything it refused was doomed to be erased from existence.

Its malignant Will was terrifying, vast as an ocean, and oppressively firm in its insidious malevolence.

No wonder Mordret had fled when faced with this harrowing creature. If anything, it was a miracle that Sunny's Shadow had managed to lull Abjuration to sleep.

…As the mass of grey flesh and charred limbs rushed at her, Nephis channeled her flames into the Blessing. The former shadowbound sword focused them into an annihilating ray of pure white light, and that light tore the distance between her and the gargantuan abomination in an instant, threatening to cut the hideous mountain of flesh in half.

However, instead... it was simply extinguished, negated by the fallen god's profane authority.

Nephis frowned.

Her attack had not been resisted, and neither had it been deflected. Instead, it was simply denied… canceled before ever getting a chance to do damage, as if the very concept of being hurt by her flames had been proclaimed a falsehood by the sinister fiend.

And since the Cursed Demon had proclaimed so, it became the truth.

Her hand faltered for a split second.

'How am I supposed to kill a deity who denies my ability to kill it?'

The Cursed Demon was a god… a fallen, corrupted god.

And that god did not believe in Nephis.

...Luckily, she believed in herself.

Chapter-2438: Concept of Humanity

The blinding ray of pure white light struck the towering abomination and was extinguished… denied the power to harm it, rather, vanishing without leaving a trace on the grey flesh of the Cursed Demon.

Time and space themselves bent, allowing its enormous mass to draw near Nephis far more swiftly than it should have been able to. Her wings raised a hurricane, sending her flying back, out of the way of countless skeletal limbs that stretched forward, aiming to grab her into a fatal grip.

The world that had let the Cursed Demon pass so swiftly resisted her movement, sapping her momentum and slowing her down. If not for the armor of the Will Nephis had forged for herself, she might not have been able to move at all.

As it was, she barely avoided the dreadful forest of charred hands, slipping away between the Cursed Demon's fingers.

Flying backward, she gritted her teeth.

The abomination had a hundred hands, but Nephis only had one sword.

And even that sword had proven ineffective against the authority of the fallen god.

The authority it possessed was too absolute in its ability to deny her. The ancient horror wielded it both as a shield and as a weapon… both as the lure and as the trap, as well, preventing the enemy from harming it while simultaneously refusing their ability to escape.

Nephis frowned.

No… her enemy was not simply wielding the authority of abjuration. It personified abjuration — the very concept of foreswearing something, thus negating its power and its very existence.

That was what Will could accomplish when elevated to the very edge of being absolute.

How would one fight against an absolute Will?

Although Nephis did not know it yet, the technique Sunny would use in Ariel's Game was to channel and personify a concept that directly opposed the power of his enemy.

However… the two of them were entirely different people, and what Sunny could achieve was not what Nephis could or should be striving to emulate.

She had her own path to forge.

Just then, the Cursed Demon's countless eyes locked on Neph's fleeting figure, their unfathomable depths gleaming with a harrowing notion.

And a moment later, she felt her very existence beginning to grow faint…

Because Abjuration was done playing with its food. Instead of resisting her attacks, the fiend simply chose to deny Nephis herself — to reject her existence, forcing the world into erasing her completely.

'How do I resist a deity's Will?'

It was a complicated question — a question that only a handful of people had been forced to ask themselves ever since the Nightmare Spell descended upon the world.

To Nephis, though, the answer was simple.

She simply had to break it with her own.

She simply had to crush it.

If the abomination refused to burn, she had to burn it with more powerful flames.

If it refused to be cut, she had to slash it with a sharper blade.

If it refused to die…

She simply had to convince death to take it.

"Hey, abomination…"

Nephis landed on the rubble and slid back, pushed almost to the edge of the water.

Her eyes flared with harrowing white radiance.

"Do you think you can snuff me out that easily?"

Her presence, which had grown faint, suddenly seemed clear, vast, and unfathomable.

Abjuration might have been able to negate the existence of a Saint… of a weaker Sovereign, possibly.

But Nephis ruled over and inspired all of humanity. To deny her existence, the creature would have had to erase all of mankind from existence first. To extinguish all of the countless stars that illuminated the vast heaven of her soul in an instant.

She was Changing Star… the Star of Ruin. The goddess of humanity.

Nephis did not like these words and had even taken measures to dissuade people from calling her by that title, as well as from worshipping her as a deity. But while she had not undergone Apotheosis yet, to some degree, there was truth to what some were saying.

For all intents of purposes, she had become the personification of humanity. Her sword was the sword of all humans, and carried the weight of all their hopes and dreams.

Of all their longing.

Her flames were fueled by their desire.

"How dare you deny me?"

Snarling, Nephis dashed forward.

The Blessing was augmented by all of her Soul Flame, empowered more than even her body and soul were due to its [Flame Conduit] trait. At the same time, its capacity to overwhelm the Will of Nightmare Creatures was further enhanced by the [Purifying Light] trait — the special quality of the shadowbound sword that made it especially deadly to those tainted by the Corruption.

But, more importantly… it had become the vessel of her Will.

And her Will was fueled by her desire to slay the Cursed Demon.

Desire was the root of all virtues, no less… as well as of all sin. There was hardly a more potent source of willpower than passionate yearning.

'Burn!'

Gathering all of her Will into the tip of the blade, Nephis moved it in a downward slash — the same downward slash she had practiced myriads of times, until every minuscule detail of performing it flawlessly was absorbed into her very bones.

And answering to her Will…

The world burned.

It burned brightly, the stone rubble melting and the dark lake boiling.

But that was only the beginning. Because in the next moment, Nephis channeled her Will into speaking the Words, as well.

A dreadful Verse of linked True Names escaped from her lips, summoning fire and destruction upon the world. The intense white flames surged and roared, consuming the very fabric of existence.

But Nephis was still not done.

Releasing the confines of her mortal shell, she unleashed her true Transcendent form.

A mass of white flame rose from the ground, easily as tall as the hideous mountain of grey flesh. The flame moved as if it possessed a life of its own, surging forward to meet the Cursed Demon…

As it did, the mass of flames assumed the shape of a radiant winged figure wielding an incandescent blade.

The giant blade woven out of pure white light fell, aiming to sever a dozen of the Nightmare Creature's scorched limbs…

The radiance of it all was so blinding that it seemed as if dawn had shone upon the shattered darkness of True Bastion.

And, illuminated by that light, the Cursed Demon cowered, terrified by the memories of the ruthless annihilating sky.

...Of course, it only faltered for a brief moment.

Chapter-2439: Heaven and Hell

The world was ablaze.

The darkness of the night was vanquished, chased away by an immaculate white abyss of incandescent light. The stone rubble burned… the waters of the vast lake burned, too. Fine particles of superheated dust permeated the air, turning the crumbling ruins into an inescapable furnace.

The air itself burned; the sky was suffused with immolating light, turning everything below its merciless expanse into cinders and ash.

The boundless ocean of flames roared, its roars fusing and melting together to speak a litany of words…

Destruction. Ruination. Annihilation.

At the same time, the world was frigid and frozen, devoid of all warmth.

The great lake was covered in ice, frozen solid. Rime and hoarfrost covered the ruins, painting eerie patterns on the stone rubble. The stones themselves had become weak and brittle, ready to break from the smallest touch. Tiny crystals of ice drifted slowly in the frigid air, shining in the pale radiance of the shattered moon.

A deep, dead silence enveloped the ruins of the colossal castle… it was a place completely devoid of warmth and life, a place where the very idea of life was strange and abhorrent.

…The world had been torn in two by the clash between a Supreme Titan and a Cursed Demon, its jagged halves fighting for dominance.

Nephis had infused her indomitable Will into her flames, setting the world on fire. The radiant hell she had unleashed was so terrible that

the fabric of reality itself was ignited, and everything around her burned — even the things that had never been meant to burn.

At the same time, Abjuration rejected the flame. The hideous abomination refused to be burned, and in doing so, it denied the concept of heat itself, turning the world into a frozen inferno.

Two opposite worlds had been born from the devastating clash of their Wills, both existing side by side as possibilities — neither realized nor entirely abolished, and therefore suspended in a state of undetermined rivalry.

As Nephis and Abjuration fought, their Wills straining against each other, one world or the other took shape for a brief moment or two, becoming reality. Then, the Cursed Demon would be scorched and burned — a heartbeat later, the flames devouring its hideous body would be extinguished, and Nephis would suddenly find herself being strangled by unbearable cold.

'This… vile… thing…'

She reeled under the pressure of fighting the fallen deity's unfathomable Will and authority… of its insidious mastery over the concept of refusal that threatened to deny her very existence, let alone her ability to do the Cursed Demon harm.

At the same time, she had to fight the abomination itself.

The dreadful forest of skeletal limbs wreaked havoc across the ruins, exerting such furious might that countless tones of stone rubble were turning into fine dust every moment.

Nephis had severed dozens of Abjuration's arms already — the blade woven from light sliced the Cursed One's flesh and bones easily, setting the bleeding stumps aflame. But the hideous abomination was too powerful and too vast, its ability to twist the absolute laws in its favor too tyrannical. So, she had not escaped from their furious clash unscathed, either.

Every time Nephis managed to land a strike, Abjuration's hands would tear at her fiery form. The long fingers of the abomination

blackened, and its claws cracked the moment it touched the white flames… but every time, some warmth was sapped from Nephis, making her flame a little more feeble, a little less scathing.

With each blow she received, her claim to existence became a little fainter.

And there was something much more terrifying happening, as well…

There were billions of little flames connected to Neph's soul, tied to it by the bonds of longing. They were like tethers that anchored her to the world and reinforced her existence… they were the subjects of her Domain.

With each blow she received, those flames seemed to grow a little fainter, as well.

It was when Nephis realized the fact that she felt something she had not felt in a long, long time…

She felt fear.

At the start of her battle against Abjuration, she had regarded it with derision, assured that the terrifying fiend would not be able to negate her existence — because it would have to negate the existence of all of humanity with her, as well.

But now…

The Cursed Demon was doing just that.

Billions of people were connected to Nephis and her Domain of Longing, bestowing her with great power and a nearly inexhaustible ocean of spirit essence. But that connection was a blade that cut both ways.

Because Nephis was connected to humanity, an especially insidious enemy could reach across the dark void through her, and follow the rays of beautiful starlight to their source. To humans who had been inspired by her, and whom she was supposed to protect.

Abjuration… was one such enemy.

This Cursed Demon was old, powerful, and terrifying. It had soared in the boundless heaven as one of the Spirits of Sun God's realm before falling into the vile depths of Corruption. It had survived the Doom War, outlived the Lord of Light, and spent thousands of years hiding from the merciless radiance of the orphaned sky in the sweltering darkness of Godgrave.

And now, it was here, in the hidden remains of True Bastion. Liberated from under the incandescent abyss that had imprisoned it, and free to spread its appalling influence as it wished.

There was only one obstacle standing in its way…

Two obstacles, really.

Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows.

And only one of them was here to face the Cursed Demon now.

Nephis bathed in the agony of her Flaw, allowing it to purify her mind and steel her resolve. She gathered her flame… she was the flame.

Her soul contained the Fire.

'I need to end it now.'

In this battle of Will, she needed to want to end the Cursed Demon here and now, want to end it so fiercely that her scorching desire could not be denied.

So…

Nephis reached deep into her heart, remembering every reason she had to want to kill the enemy, and every reason she had to want to prevent the enemy from killing her.

To be the last one standing.

And then, she spoke a Name that she had not been able to invoke before.

She invoked the Name of Passion.

Chapter-2440: Knowledge of Passion

Invoking the Name of Passion was far more difficult than any other Nephis had ever invoked.

Perhaps it was because, unlike the other Names, the source of this one was Nephis herself.

Her own longing, her own desire, her own yearning, her own passion… she had to know them, to burn with them, to admit them starkly without pretense or falsehood. Then, she had to infuse them into the Name, and channel that Name with her soul.

Shaping the world in accordance with the melody of her heart, and forcing the two to resonate with each other.

The act itself was an immensely difficult one… after all, what human was completely honest with themselves? Completely honest about themselves? Who wasn't scared of bearing themselves and laying the truth of who they were out in the open for the world to see?

For them themselves to see?

The first step was difficult, but the second one was arduous. Invoking the Name of Passion meant drawing it out of herself, and channeling it put more strain on Neph's soul and willpower than she had ever felt before while Shaping.

But she endured.

She endured the cruelly honest moment of self-reflection, with all her selfishness and weakness put on display, and she endured the strain of channeling the Name of Passion too.

She invoked it.

She finally succeeded!

And when she did…

It was as if blinders had been removed from her eyes.

Nephis heard the Spell whispering into her ear, but she did not have to listen to its loathsome voice to know that she had mastered another branch of her Aspect Legacy, the Memory of Light.

She had mastered the Knowledge of Passion.

Just as it had happened with the Knowledge of Fire and the Knowledge of Destruction, she could enjoy the fruit of her labor — a torrent of information poured into her mind, as if a seal had been broken, completing and complementing what she had already intuitively understood.

An underlying understanding of a multitude of matters, an instinctual grasp of subtle secrets and intricate techniques, a collection of Names related to passion and desire…

It was as if she had spent a lifetime striving to explore and fathom something in theory while simultaneously applying that wealth of knowledge in practice — and was now receiving the fruits of this lived experience without the memories themselves.

But that was not important at the moment. Nephis could assess and consolidate the boon of mastering another branch of her Aspect Legacy later… right now, she was still reeling from having invoked the Name of Passion.

Channeling that Name was like adding fuel to her already scathing desire. Ignited by the invocation of Passion, it flared with even greater intensity, emboldened and empowered by her sorcery.

Her desire, in turn, empowered and emboldened her Will, making it so much more potent.

It was like a comprehensive augmentation of her fiery spirit… a

cheat-like, self-fulfilling prophecy. It was like something that she had always been meant to possess, but was denied until now. The cornerstone of her entire Aspect, or maybe a missing piece that had been preventing her from making the next step.

Nephis suddenly felt incredibly alive.

Even the terrible agony of her Flaw seemed less torturous, for a moment. The pain was the same… but the suffering it brought her felt not as meaningless, and therefore more bearable.

Doubtless, uncompromising, burning with passion…

Her Will blossomed with unreserved heat, and that was enough to break the stalemate between her authority and that of the Cursed Demon.

The world, which had been torn in two, was finally restored to being whole again.

The frigid hell of Abjuration's creation was vanquished, and the incandescent inferno of purifying flames was actualized, settling to take its lawful place in reality.

And so…

Just like Nephis had promised...

Abjuration burned.

***

[...You have slain Abjuration.]

Having assumed her human form, Nephis fell to her knees and gasped, clutching at her chest. She tried to draw air into her scorched lungs, but there was no air left for her to inhale — all of it had been burned away, turning the ruins of True Bastion into an incandescent, suffocating desert.

The crumbling castle was no more, turned into a vast plain of glowing, white-hot slag. The lake was gone, too, its dark waters

turned into clouds of superheated plasma. The remains of the city that had been hidden below the lake, and the bones of its former citizens, had turned to ash.

'Aargh…'

Nephis tried to groan, but without air to carry her voice, there was no sound.

She closed her mouth and gritted her teeth, enduring the pain in silence.

Even after she had overpowered the Will of the Cursed Demon by invoking the Name of Passion, their battle lasted for a long while. She had dealt the insidious abominations plenty of grievous wounds, and received more than a few of them herself in return.

Her body was immaculate and pristine, but her soul was in shambles.

She had burned her soul cores, as well, damaging a few of them almost to the point of breaking.

But since she was a halfbreed who was born of two worlds, belonging to neither, she could absorb the soul fragments of Nightmare Creatures slain by her flames just like she would those of humans. Abjuration had been a Cursed Demon, and an ancient one at that… so, her cores were now rebuilding themselves, having received a generous infusion of soul fragments after the abomination's death.

'...Just Abjuration, huh?'

It seemed like the Spell did not deem it worthy to even mention the Rank and Class of Cursed Nightmare Creatures when announcing their deaths.

It made sense, really. After all, there was… there had been only one Abjuration in the world. It was one of a kind, so no one would confuse it with some other horror bearing the same name.

Nephis looked around, drowning in the heat of the incandescent hell of her own creation.

It was going to take a long time for True Bastion to cool off…

And there was no reason for her to remain here anymore. On the contrary, there were plenty of reasons for her to leave as soon as possible.

Even though she was not channeling the Name of Passion anymore, she could still feel its aftereffects. Usually, she would be drained of all feelings and emotions after abusing her Aspect so thoroughly… but today, Nephis was full of them instead.

She wanted to return to illusory Bastion. She wanted to revel in delicious food, to satiate her thirst with fragrant wine, to soothe her tired body with the cold caress of water and luxuriate in its embrace…

She wanted to meet Sunny.

She longed for him with such intensity that it felt a little frightening.

'Let's go...'

Holding her breath — she had no choice but to — Nephis rose to her feet and looked around one last time.

The corpse of Abjuration had turned to ash. There were no soul shards left to collect since she had already absorbed the soul fragments. She was standing near one of the deep cracks formed on the mountain during the siege of Bastion… it was dark and seemingly bottomless, leading far down.

There was nothing left for her to do here.

Nephis turned, intending to return…

But then, something scraped beneath her feet.

Frowning, she bent down and picked up a small piece of broken glass that had been laying on the edge of the fissure — the only cold thing in the white-hot furnace of the annihilated ruins.

The piece of glass was blackened by soot, but when she scraped it

with a nail, a fiery white eye looked back at her from beneath.

It was the reflection of her own eye, and the white flame dancing in its depths.

'A mirror?'

Nephis threw one last look into the dark fissure, her frown growing deeper.

Then, she tossed the fragment of the shattered mirror away and turned around.

It was time for her to leave.

Ravenheart awaited...

Chapter-2441: Immediate Impact

Sunny shook his head as he continued on his way. The memories of learning what Nephis had done in Bastion were followed by the memories of reuniting with her in Ravenheart — at that point, he finally reached his destination.

Having spent several weeks surrounded by billowing clouds of ash and Cursed abominations, fighting one desperate battle after another, he was truly a pitiful sight to behold. His body might have been rebuilt and perfected by Flesh Weave, but he still could not wait to take a shower, lower himself into a bath, or better yet, rest his weary self in a steam room, followed by a plunge into ice-cold water.

It just so happened that he could really use a cold plunge at the moment…

Leaving his battered incarnation to tend to itself, Sunny shifted his focus to the avatar who remained in the council room. The Song sisters had left by then, leaving him alone with Nephis and Cassie.

The mood in the spacious chamber was different now. The sunset had drawn its last breath, surrendering the world to the embrace of darkness — the sky outside the tall windows was black and littered with shimmering stars, snow dancing in the torrents of cold wind.

The brief levity was gone, replaced by a sense of gravity. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then spoke with a sigh — this time, he described what had happened in the miniature realm of Ariel's Game in detail, without wasting his time on jokes or witty wordplay.

Going over everything he had experienced helped him put the events of the past weeks in perspective, as well.

'Let's see…'

First, he explained the nature of the little, dreadful world created by Ariel — the vast grid of towering mountains, the Snow and Ash Domains, the significance of dawn and dusk for the game pieces, the role of Castles and Shrines, and lastly, the existence of the terrifying arbiter who hid beneath the clouds. These were the laws governing the Death Game.

Then, he described his own actions in the game and the battles he had fought.

The battle against the Crystal Hive was relatively insignificant, in the grand scheme of things. At best, it was a valuable exercise in fighting a powerful foe while being suppressed by a hostile Domain — which wasn't really that new of an experience for Sunny or for Nephis, who suffered a much worse version of the same suppression every time they entered the waking world.

Next was the battle against Abundance. That one was a much more valuable lesson… a priceless one, even, since it was the first time Sunny had fought a Cursed abomination. He had learned about how lesser deities embodied concepts and weaponized them to twist the absolute laws of existence in their favor from that clash, as well as understood the natural affinity of his own Will better.

In the end, Sunny had defeated Abundance by utilizing sorcery to counter and restrain the Beast's authority, then slowly poisoning its soul with Death Will.

Nephis smiled faintly when he described crushing the infinite worm under his boot.

"...What an elegant solution."

Sunny chuckled.

"Thank you. Killing Abundance was the pebble that started an avalanche. With a Sacred shade in my service, I could tackle more powerful foes and slowly build an advantage over the Snow Tyrant. Plus... it was quite satisfying!"

He continued, describing the race to the Shrine of Truth and its first siege — his battle against the Wolf, the grand spell he had woven, and the eventual annihilation of the volcano.

The details of how he had held off a Cursed Demon while fueling his trap with the Demon's own strength had a greater effect on Nephis and Cassie.

Cassie especially seemed stunned.

"So, you… channeled an opposite concept to that of the Wolf?"

Sunny nodded.

"When you fight deities, the battle itself is only the tip of the iceberg. There is a clash of Wills happening at the same time, hidden from view — it influences the cadence of combat, deciding who will gain the decisive advantage. Gods reshape the world around them according to what they are, and in order to defeat them, you have to break that vision of reality first. One would ideally achieve that with overwhelming strength… but since we are weaker than the Cursed Ones, I had to get inventive."

Cassie smiled.

"Amazing…"

Nephis, meanwhile, contemplated his words deeply.

Eventually, a sigh escaped from her lips, and she gave Sunny a long look.

It was sort of... boastful? Satisfied? A little prideful?

However, Nephis did not seem proud of herself. Rather, she seemed to be proud of Sunny... and satisfied with herself as a result?

'What has gotten into her?'

"It is an incredible technique, Sunny. Sadly… I don't think anyone except you can make use of it. Your Aspect and Aspect Legacy make you supremely adaptable, and this arcane ability to channel foreign

concepts is their culmination. No one else would have been able to do something like that."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

Well... she wasn't wrong. Granted, he did not explain how he had almost killed Kai after taking this technique a step further in the battle against the Puppeteer yet — but that could wait a little longer.

After all, who didn't like being praised by their girlfriend and receiving these kinds of looks from her? Sunny wanted to enjoy the moment a little longer.

He sighed.

"The spell I created takes most credit for the deaths of the Wolf and the Brass Giant. It was a significant breakthrough in and of itself, made possible by the lessons I had learned while creating a bow for Kai. Actually… out of everything I gained in Ariel's Game, this one might be the most immediately impactful."

Nephis gave him an intense look.

"Do you mean?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. It opens an entirely new horizon of possibilities for us. I can further develop and expand this new branch of Weaving… then, I'll be able to create more intricate spells. Even with seven bodies, I won't be able to enchant every Citadel of humanity — but doing so for our most important strongholds in the Dream Realm might be possible, as long as there are enough Sacred soul shards to fuel the spells."

Nephis looked to Cassie.

"Cassie, do you think you can help Sunny integrate his enchantments into the fortifications of human Citadels with runic sorcery?"

The blind seer considered her words seriously for a while, then gave her a hesitant shrug.

"It is… not impossible. Fusing two schools of sorcery won't make the result greater, but it might hasten the process and make it easier for the Saints in charge of the Citadels to operate and maintain the arrays. Sunny and I will have to spend a lot of time side by side to work out the framework, though. I've… I've never considered large-scale runic arrays thoroughly before, but it should not be entirely different from the sorcery of the Ivory Island and the Chain Breaker."

Nephis sighed.

"Time… it all comes down to time, doesn't it?"

She fell silent for a moment.

"Still, that is something worth investing time in. Our cities will come under siege eventually — when that happens, there has to be a way to keep the population safe while the champions repel the enemy. Sunny, I would be grateful if you and Cassie made that project a priority."

Sunny smiled.

"Sure. I can spare an incarnation or two."

In fact, he was glad to receive this opportunity.

Sunny did not pursue fame or recognition. Being forced into the shadows by the revelation of why Weaver's Lineage had been forbidden by the gods suited him fine — if not for the fact that he could not exert as much influence from the shadows freely as he would have wanted to.

Humanity was protected by two Sovereigns, but one of them was severely constrained in what he could do to actually help people. So, working on fortifying human cities in the Dream Realm was a good way to apply his power for the benefit of all in a secretive, but efficient manner.

Sunny's expression turned somber as he continued his tale, describing the eerie encounter with the Cursed Demon and the days missing from his memory. Then, he told Nephis and Cassie about the battle against the Rat King and how he and Kai had utilized the inherent

vulnerability of that Cursed Beast to destroy it.

As he did, he summoned the shade of the Rat King to illustrate his point…

Strangely enough, the appearance of a large, feral-looking black rat on his palm did not impress the two women that much. In fact, their reactions did not seem enthusiastic at all, for some reason.

It was almost as if they did not like this adorable black cutie-pie!

But why wouldn't they?

'Weirdos…'

Dismissing the Rat after giving it a few head scratches, Sunny considered his words and described the final battle of Ariel's Game — the battle against the Spirit of Doubt, Puppeteer itself.

Chapter-2442: Self-Sufficient Cycle

"...And so, I cleaved the Snow Tyrant's head clean off."

He finished the description of the battle with a thoughtful expression, looking at the stars burning in the cold black sky beyond the window.

"I think that it was mostly lying through its teeth to confuse me — well, actually, I don't think that it had a mouth, so it was lying through whatever it had instead of teeth. Puppeteer was definitely not as immune to the madness of Corruption as it presented itself, at least. As for the rest…"

He frowned.

"...Maybe there was some truth to what it said, after all. Even if it twisted the meaning of it all entirely to sow seeds of doubt into my mind."

Speaking of which, Sunny had felt a few of those still growing in his heart after returning from Ariel's Game — soon to give birth to larval Worm's of Doubt, certainly. He poisoned them with Death Will and obliterated them completely, shivering in fear and disgust, then asked Nephis to purify him with her radiant flames just in case. Kai underwent the same cleansing.

That did the job, preventing the Puppeteer from infecting the world with its sinister malice from beyond the grave. Things could have gone differently if it had met a less paranoid — and well-informed — adversary.

There was silence in the council chamber for a while.

Then, Nephis said in a contemplative tone:

"Actually, I'm inclined to believe at least one thing the moth told you."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Which one?"

She looked into the distance, a distant expression on her beautiful face.

"What it said about the Flame waning. If you think about it… that is only natural, no?"

Sunny studied her carefully.

"I'm not sure. Natural? How so?"

Nephis let out a light sigh.

"Our world was created by the gods, who were born from the Flame of Desire. But a flame does indeed need fuel to burn — it cannot exist in a vacuum. So, what fuel was there for the Flame of Desire to burn, all those eons ago, before time even existed?"

Sunny tilted his head a little, confused by her words.

'What fuel...'

Then, his eyes widened slightly.

What else could there have been, in the eternity before time existed?

He whispered:

"The… Void?"

Nephis nodded.

"That would make sense. An everlasting, endless source of fuel for an immortal, inexhaustible flame."

Her eyes flared with a promise of white flames, as well.

"But there was also an irrevocable conflict between the ever-changing Void and the eternally constant Desire. So, the gods waged a war against the Void and eventually imprisoned it… separating the Flame from the Void by nothing. Now, the Flame burns in a vacuum, deprived of its fuel... of its source. So, the Flame is waning, and at the same time, the Flame is sustaining itself, by itself... from itself."

Cassie spoke at that moment, her voice sounding soft in the silence of the council chamber:

"But it does sustain itself. It's a closed, self-sufficient cycle. We are all a part of the Flame, and our own desires fuel it. The Puppeteer tried its hardest to paint that truth as something vile and appalling, but I think it's the opposite. To me, it seems… it seems beautiful. A flame that ensures itself, burning brightly with human striving and longing..."

She faced them and smiled hesitantly.

"Don't you think so?"

Nephis looked at the stars, while Sunny shrugged.

"Well, we are indeed of the Flame — of this vast and strange existence the gods created. So the Puppeteer's whole argument was meaningless behind its sophistry, since he was trying to convince me that being destroyed and consumed by the Void is a better alternative to being alive… simply because being alive is not all sunshine and roses."

He scoffed.

"I don't know about you, but sunshine is overrated… I'd much rather relax in the shade. And as far as roses go, most of the flowers I encountered in my life had tried to either eat me, shred me to pieces with their thorns, or get their pollen into my body to use it as fertilizer — none of which is conducive to being alive, as it happens."

Sunny smiled.

Yes, life was cruel at times… life was a constant struggle, and for some people — people like him — it was more often bitter than

sweet.

…But it was, after all, sweet.

Life was also beautiful, joyful, and exciting, full of precious things like affection, contentment, accomplishment, fun… it contained friendship, camaraderie, love, passion; there was beauty, intellectual pursuits, challenge, and thrill…

Even though Sunny's life had not been an easy one, it had also been a life full of great pleasure and joy. One side of his life could not have existed without the other, and the struggles he had overcome to be where he was gave meaning to it all, making each triumph feel so much more satisfying.

That too was the Flame…

And that was what he had to protect from being consumed by Corruption, from becoming swallowed by the alien malice of the primordial Void.

He sighed and looked at Nephis.

"You had a run-in with a Cursed One yourself, didn't you? What do you think?"

Sunny had killed four Cursed Nightmare Creatures in Ariel's Game — Abundance, the Wolf, the Rat King, and the Puppeteer. The Brass Giant had perished as a result of his actions, as well, while three more fallen deities had died in a mysterious way.

It was a stunning achievement, no doubt… and yet, Sunny did not feel a lot of confidence at the moment.

In fact, he was left properly shaken by his experiences in the Death Game.

In truth, while Sunny had been at a great disadvantage in the dreadful world of Ariel's creation, its laws had also worked in his favor. The Cursed Ones had been restrained in how they could move and what they could do, for one. The nature of the Ash Domain made the battle for the Shrine of Truth easier, while the Shrine itself had

empowered his companions tremendously…

And even then, he had just barely survived.

If Sunny had met the same Cursed Ones in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, who knew how things would have turned out?

Nephis remained silent for a while, then said in a somber tone:

"It was… much more perilous than I had imagined. In truth, I am lucky to be alive."

Her expression darkened.

"That single Cursed Demon could have wiped out all of humanity. I defeated it, yes — but my victory was not assured. The battle was a close one, in fact, no different from a gamble."

She pursed her lips.

"In short, the Cursed Ones are too dangerous. Every single one of them is an extinction-level threat, despite how powerful you and I have become. And there are more than a few of them out there, as well. There are five just here in the Jade Palace at the moment… gods only know how many remain in Godgrave, both in the Hollows and in the Sea of Ash."

Nephis scowled.

"There are also the Death Zones south of Godgrave, the frozen wastelands west of Ravenheart, the Hollow Mountains and the Underworld, the Burned Forest, the Abyss and the Shadow Realm, the unexplored reaches… and depths… of the Stormsea, and other regions of the Dream Realm we have not even discovered yet."

Finally, she looked at Sunny and let out a tired sigh.

"If all of them — or even only some of them — suddenly converge on the Human Domain, we will stand no chance. And that… that is not even mentioning the Unholy Ones. Considering how vast the gap between the Great and Cursed Nightmare Creatures is already, I'm afraid that both of us combined won't be strong enough to face even

a single one."

Sunny remained silent, a grim expression on his face. It was not that he did not have anything to say… it was just that he agreed with Nephis. The two of them were the strongest warriors of humanity — by far — and they were barely powerful enough to contend against isolated Cursed abominations.

What would happen if an Unholy Nightmare Creature revealed itself, instead?

He shivered.

Nephis, meanwhile, shook her head.

"...Which is to say that our reasoning was correct. Being Supreme is not at all enough to achieve our goals. We must become more powerful… much more powerful. And we must gain that power as fast as we can."

She looked at him, hesitated for a moment, and then added in a lower tone:

"Or… at least one of us must. If they are willing."

Sunny remained silent for a while, leaning on the backrest of the Shadow Chair. Many thoughts wandered around his mind aimlessly, but he still could not come up with the answer.

In the end, he said:

"There is something else about my experience in Ariel's Game that I must tell you. Something… quite important. Maybe even more important than anything we have known until now."

He inhaled deeply, and then looked at Nephis and Cassie.

"It concerns a group of people who called themselves the Nine, Weaver, and the Nightmare Spell…"

Chapter-2443: Summary of Everything

Sunny had spent more than a decade uncovering the dreadful secrets of the Dream Realm and slowly piecing together its truth. The road to the knowledge he now possessed had been paved with blood and smoldering ruins, and very few people — if any at all — knew as much as he did about the hidden nature of the world.

Which was not to say that others had not searched for the truth with just as much determination, and that no one else had a claim to the forbidden knowledge he harbored.

The late Sovereigns had known countless secrets, for example. There was Nephis, as well… she knew nearly as much as Sunny did, having spent the years they had been apart pursuing truths of her own. He did not have a monopoly on arcane knowledge, and neither did the world stand frozen while he was away.

It was just that Sunny had an overwhelming advantage when it came to solving the chilling mysteries of the past… or at least used to have. That advantage was his former innate Attribute, [Fated], which had put him on a collision course with Weaver and other main characters of the end of the world all those years ago.

However, Nephis had a great advantage of her own. That advantage… was Cassie. There was hardly a person in the world better suited to learning the lost and forgotten truths than her — so, Nephis and Cassie had learned quite a few of the same secrets Sunny had, in the years of his absence.

Later, the three of them put their knowledge together.

…Now, however, Sunny was once again far ahead.

Because this time, the secret he had learned was truly world-shattering.

It was a secret to end all secrets, as well as the answer to countless mysteries that had been plaguing them for years.

So, Sunny told them everything he had learned in Ariel's Game.

How Weaver had challenged the Demon of Dread to a Death Game. Who the Nine were … how Weaver died for the first time by Orphne's hand. How she killed the Demon of Fate once again in the Shadow Realm, how the Nightmare Spell was completed by consuming the gods…

And why.

Of course, he could only tell them the truth without explaining how all of it related to him personally — Cassie had already deduced a lot about who Sunny was and had been from the gaps in her memory and the things she did not seem capable of remembering, while Nephis had her suspicions as well… but still, neither of them could retain the knowledge of what they had known about him in the past.

When he finished talking, a stunned silence reigned in the council chamber. A snowstorm was raging outside the window, obscuring the starlit sky… the chamber seemed darker than before, with shadows nestling in its corners, and no one dared to speak for a long while.

Eventually, it was Sunny himself who broke the silence.

"Aahh... I've been chasing this truth for so long, you know. It almost feels unreal, to finally know it all — well, most of it, at least. I… I don't quite know how to feel. But I do know that knowledge is the origin of all power. So, it feels like we have grown immensely more powerful despite remaining the same, I guess."

Cassie was frozen still, her expression distant. She seemed to be thinking about something feverishly, thousands of thoughts swarming behind her beautiful, unseeing eyes.

Sunny shuddered to imagine what was happening in the little, devious head of hers.

Nephis, meanwhile, was somber and focused, looking at Sunny with silent, but scathing intensity.

After a while, she inhaled slowly, and then spoke quietly:

"So… let me get this straight."

She stood up and walked to the window, watching the snowstorm rage behind the transparent crystal pane. Her voice sounded just as aloof as usual, but there was a wealth of hidden emotion in it now:

"A long time ago, at the dusk of the Golden Age, the gods had grown distant and indifferent, neglecting their duties… what people considered to be their duties, at least. In their neglectful absence, an empire founded by War God and presumably enjoying his patronage launched a series of bloody conquests, slowly spreading across the mortal realms like a plague. That conquest continued until they encountered a small, peaceful nation… a culture that worshiped no gods, but instead built temples to fate itself."

She turned and looked at Sunny with a frown.

"That culture was conquered and wiped out, but not before sending out nine fated heroes… or monsters, depending on how you look at it… on a quest to avenge their people. Avenge their people by slaying the gods."

Sunny nodded and continued:

"But how can mortals hope to defeat the gods? The Nine were no match for them, and so, they set out to ignite a war between the daemons and the gods, knowing that it would bring the Empire of War — and all of existence with it — to ruin. In that way, they became the architects of the doom that swallowed the world."

Nephis smiled darkly.

"Only there was one daemon who refused to participate in the Doom War. That daemon, in fact, knew what the Nine were trying to achieve all along, as well as that there would be no winner in the war… that everything would be destroyed by it, with only corpses left in its wake. So, that daemon devised a plan of their own, a plan

to twist fate."

She inhaled deeply and finished in a cold, somber tone:

"Weaver created the Nightmare Spell, let it spread unnoticed among the desperate refugees of the end of days, and then manipulated one of the Nine into slaying them in the Shadow Realm, where the Void Gate stands — the Void Gate that had been opened by someone during the final battle of the Doom War. Weaver's death was a catalyst that completed the Spell, allowing it to consume both the gods and the daemons... and realize its true design."

Cassie finally stirred, tilting her head a little and whispering:

"To lull the Forgotten God, who was released from the Void, back to sleep. And then infect the humans who found shelter in the orphaned Divine Realms in an attempt to nurture new gods… gods who were taught to defy fate, and would therefore be able to destroy the Forgotten One once and for all in the depths of the Seventh Nightmare."

Neph's expression turned cold.

"...Only it did not work out quite like Weaver had hoped, until now. Every Divine Realm infected by the Spell succumbed to the tide of nightmares and was devoured by the Dream Realm, after all, their civilizations annihilated and consumed by Corruption. The people of the Twilight Sea, the civilization of Godgrave, and the rest — all of them are gone, and we are all that remains. The last sparks of the Flame."

Sunny sighed, then nodded.

"You do understand what it means, don't you?"

Cassie was the one who answered:

"It means that humanity is fundamentally wrong about the mechanism and the purpose of the Spell, for one. In truth, what we call the Nightmare Spell is really two connected, but separate processes… we had suspicions, of course, but now it's confirmed. The Forgotten God sleeps, dreaming a nightmare — vestiges of his dreams

spill into reality, slowly infecting all of existence. That is where the Nightmare Seeds come from, tainting everything around them with Corruption. And when the Seeds bloom, the Forgotten God's Nightmare continues to spread — Gates open in new realms, and those worlds are then integrated into his own Divine Realm… into the Dream Realm."

Sunny leaned back, looking into the distance.

"So, the Nightmare Spell does not create the Nightmare Seeds, and neither does it create Nightmare Creatures. Rather, it is… like an interface built atop of it all, through it all, like a symbiotic — or maybe parasitic — presence. It constructs Nightmares within the Seeds and grants its carriers a way to access these Nightmares in order to destroy the Seeds from within. That is why those... those who do not carry the Spell cannot challenge a Seed — if they approach one, they will simply be exposing themselves to Corruption."

Cassie drew a shaky breath.

"That is one of the main functions of the Spell. The second function is to nurture its carriers in various ways and help them walk the Path of Ascension at a speed unthinkable for natural Awakened… in the most ruthless, but also quite an effective way."

She exhaled slowly before adding:

"The third of its main functions…"

Sunny ended the sentence.

"Is the most fundamental one, which lies at the root of it all. It is to keep the Forgotten God asleep."

He paused for a moment, and then said with a hint of fascination in his voice:

"Many questions about how the Spell functions remain, of course. For example, what powers it? Does it consume a bit of the soul fragments of every living being slain by its carriers, perhaps? Or is it using the Nightmare of the Forgotten God as a perpetual battery to fuel itself?

Is it still intact, or has its mechanism been corrupted over the eons? How exactly does it create the Nightmares, and what is the nature of the phantoms populating them? I am pretty sure that the Spell was not woven out of essence strings, but from the Strings of Fate themselves… is that why it seems omniscient, possessing the knowledge of both the past and the future?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Weaver, that sinister daemon… they pulled quite a stunning trick back then, at the end. Didn't they? Compared to what the Spell is, even the act of slaying the gods — and the daemons — almost seems to pale in comparison. I mean, who could have guessed that killing the gods had been merely the means to an end, not the actual goal? And who could have been brazen enough to treat their deaths that way?"

He sighed, suddenly feeling suffocated.

Sunny was Fateless now… but that did not seem to free him from Weaver's grasp. The nebulous daemon had envisioned a role for their inheritor — their epigone — and even after being torn from the tapestry of fate, Sunny was still marching to the beat of their drum.

That was because Weaver did not need to manipulate his fate in order to control him. They could simply manipulate the entire world and leave Sunny no choice but to go where the Demon of Fate had wanted him to go. Even though he was not Fated anymore, the weight of the decisions Sunny had already made ensured that his future choices would be in line with what Weaver had envisioned.

'That damn daemon…'

He exhaled slowly.

"All of it is fascinating, and there's a lot we still don't know. But these details are not exactly important right now, are they?"

Nephis, who had kept quiet until then, gave him a poignant look.

"What is important, then?"

Sunny met her gaze, choosing his words carefully.

In the end, he spoke in a tone that was a little softer than usual.

"Well… you are. Your goal has always been to destroy the Spell. Now that you know that it is not as malignant as we believed, and that its existence is necessary to keep the Forgotten God from swallowing us all, doesn't it change anything? Or rather... doesn't it change everything?"

Nephis studied him for a while, her expression unreadable.

Then, she pursed her lips slightly and turned to the window.

"...It doesn't really change much, though."

Chapter-2444: Dream of the Forgotten God

Sunny stared at her, stunned.

"It… doesn't change much? How so?"

Nephis lingered for a long time, then shrugged.

"My goal has always been to destroy the Nightmare Spell. But… back when I chose that goal, I was young and knew little of the world. As I grew and learned more, my understanding of the world expanded… and therefore, my goals expanded as well. The Nightmare Spell, the Nightmares — to me, they are one and the same. I want to destroy them all. And even if the root evil is the Nightmare itself, the Spell is not free of guilt either."

Her voice grew a little lower.

"You two seem to accept that the Nightmare Spell is a benevolent force, but I disagree. Yes, with what we know now, it is impossible to deny that its purpose, at least, was a noble one. It was created to save the world, no less. However, you forget that it was created by a daemon, a divine being as old as time itself… and their concept of benevolence and nobility would have been quite alien to ours."

Turning around, she looked at Sunny and Cassie coldly.

"Sure, the Nightmare Spell pushes humans to walk the Path of Ascension as fast as possible — in order to give us strength to resist the spreading Nightmare. But have you considered that it might not be going about it in the best possible way? As far as I see it, the Spell's solution to the problem is to simply throw as many bodies at it as possible. Most will die gruesomely, and then, even more people will die. Countless lives will be ruined, and entire generations will be

wiped out. But as long as a few survive and achieve a higher Rank… then everything is okay, isn't it?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, considering her words. Then, he said tentatively:

"But you can't deny that it's… effective, can you? And that we are in a pretty desperate situation, so it's not like we are spoiled for choices."

Nephis shook her head.

"Is it that effective, though? Or is it crude and wasteful? Think back to everything you have experienced. Was there really no better way? We are the strongest champions of humanity, you and I. But is it because we were the best, or is it because we were lucky? Would things have been different if the Spell had been different? All those lost lives… all that wasted potential. How would the world have turned out if the First Lord of the Bright Castle had not been sent into a death trap by the Spell, for example? How far could he and his cohort have gone? What about Daeron the Serpent King? If the Spell had not sent him into a Nightmare that only someone immune to Corruption could have conquered, what would have happened to the people of the Twilight Sea?"

She shook her head and gritted her teeth.

"You can only see the Spell in a positive light because you are its beneficiary, not its victim. No matter its purpose, the Spell is ruthless, inhuman, and vile. All this great power, all that startling potential… and you tell me that the great Demon of Fate could not come up with anything better than forcing children into the jaws of the Nightmare? Do you know how many Aspirants die every year without ever becoming Sleepers? I know, because I can feel their flames being snuffed out day and night. Was there really no better way?"

White flames ignited in Neph's eyes, and she grimaced.

"You can convince me that the Nightmare Spell is a necessary evil that we are stuck with, but you can't convince me that it is benign. You can't convince me not to hate it."

Then, suddenly, her expression eased, turning cold and impassive once again. Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then sighed and turned back to the window.

"Well… it doesn't matter, anyway. I meant it when I said that this new knowledge doesn't change much — regardless of how I feel about the Spell. A long time ago, I told someone that I intended to conquer all the Nightmares, and destroy the Spell. And I still do. It is just that now, I know that there will be a seventh Nightmare after the sixth, and that I will have to end the Forgotten God first before dismantling the Spell."

She chuckled bitterly.

"There would be no need for it by then anymore, anyway. So this entire argument is moot."

Sunny frowned, then leaned forward a little.

"But that is just the thing, Neph. It is not moot. Have you forgotten what our goal is? It is to prevent the destruction of humanity. Killing the Forgotten God is what Weaver wanted to achieve, not us. Who cares what that treacherous daemon wanted? Weaver is dead, so we are free to do what we want. And to achieve that… we don't need to risk ourselves in a battle against a being that neither the gods nor the daemons were able to stop."

He clenched his fists.

"We don't need to conquer the Seven Nightmares and destroy the Forgotten God. We don't need to destroy the Spell, either — the Spell can continue keeping that thing asleep. It has contained him for eons, and it can contain him for a few eons more. We just need to become strong enough to contend against the creatures that are threatening humanity here and now… we just need to become Divine."

Others would have called him a fool or a coward for thinking like that, but Sunny did not care. In fact, he considered people who could not see past what was intended for them foolish, instead.

Sure, the Forgotten God was the source of Corruption that plagued

the world, and destroying him would theoretically stop the spread of the Nightmare… but so what?

None of them had even considered the possibility of a world without Nightmare Seeds and Nightmare Creatures before. These were merely inalienable facts of life until just a few days ago, and rather than fantasizing about some kind of heavenly paradise, they had been busy planning how to ensure the survival and prosperity of mankind in reality.

As long as its safe resettlement into the Dream Realm could be ensured, and as long as there were champions powerful enough to keep the Cursed and Unholy Nightmare Creatures at bay, humanity could not only survive, but thrive in this world they lived in.

There were already vast cities like Bastion and Ravenheart here, in the Dream Realm… there were electric street lights and fertile fields, roads were being built across the wilderness, trade caravans were traveling between human strongholds, and new settlers were arriving every day. Sure, there were also Nightmare Creatures and horrors beyond description… but that was just life.

He had never known anything different, and most of humanity had not either. And yet, that did not stop people from living their lives… from struggling, striving, and thriving in this dangerous, but generous and beautiful world.

That was what Sunny wanted to protect. That was why he had returned from his journey to the edge of the world, resolving to change it.

Slaying some ancient God of Corruption had nothing to do with it. Sunny could sleep peacefully even knowing that the Forgotten God was dreaming about him somewhere out there, imprisoned in a Nightmare by the Spell.

Sure, there was a possibility that the Spell would fail one day and that its prisoner would awaken… but that was not an unfamiliar reality, either. After all, even before the Nightmare Spell descended, people knew that the sun would die one day, and that the entire universe was moving toward eventual demise.

But nobody threw themselves into the sun because of it.

The world had always been meant to end one day… probably long after humanity had already destroyed itself ten times over. The awakening of the Forgotten God was no different from the heat death of the universe, in that regard.

Only destroying the Forgotten God would probably be far more difficult and deadly than destroying the universe. After all, he was older than the universe, having participated in its creation.

…And that was whom Weaver wanted them to kill?

Sunny shook his head.

"Becoming Divine is already impossible enough. Sure, I understand that we are indoctrinated to count and do everything in sevens, and that it feels wrong to ignore the logical conclusion of the path laid out for us by Weaver… but our goal has been to become gods in order to protect humanity. Not to challenge the final Nightmare and correct an error made by the true gods when designing the world. Not to eliminate the Flaw of existence. A perfect world is a dead world, anyway, so why would we want to throw ourselves into something entirely fatal, and meaningless on top of that?"

Nephis looked at him with a deep scowl.

"To prevent countless people from having their choice robbed from them by the Nightmare Spell. To save countless lives from dying in the Nightmares. To ensure that the end of the world never comes. To destroy the Spell once and for all! Why… why can't you see it?"

Sunny did not respond for a while, looking at her silently.

He knew… he knew that deep down, Nephis was a selfish person. That she did what she wanted, and it was merely a happy coincidence that what she wanted was to be a righteous and decent person — according to her own harsh understanding of righteousness and decency, of course.

But what she really wanted was to destroy the Spell, which she hated — and do so in a way she would not be ashamed of.

To avenge herself upon the world.

The Nightmare Gates, the Nightmare Spell, it was indeed all the same to her. She would not be able to let go of her most ardent desire easily.

But…

Sunny was a selfish person, too.

"I see it. But I… I simply don't want you to throw your life away, Neph. Not in an attempt to create some kind of flawless Garden of Eden, of all things. I need you alive… please, try to see that as well."

They both remained silent for a while, looking at each other.

In the end, Nephis sighed and turned away.

"...Why are we arguing, anyway? It's not even guaranteed that we will survive the Fifth Nightmare, let alone the Sixth. We can't even think about challenging the Seventh right now, and won't be for many years. So… let's cross that bridge when we get there."

Sunny lingered for a while, then nodded reluctantly.

"Sure. Let's focus on what we need to do right now, indeed."

He knew that she had not been convinced, and that her determination to destroy the Nightmare Spell was as firm as ever.

But… Sunny also knew that many things could change with time. So, he tacitly agreed to continue this conversation later, for now.

Nephis sighed.

"So, what are your plans?"

He leaned back and smiled.

"Well, since you so kindly disposed of that Cursed Demon and cleared the path to the Mirror Maze, I thought I'd get Effie and explore True Bastion a little. Oh… but I want to make a short stop in the frozen

wastelands west of here first. There's something there I want to try finding. I'll depart for Bastion after that."

Nephis hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"Good. Actually, I found something after the battle with Abjuration. A fragment of one of Mordret's Reflections. It could have been there from when we unleashed that Cursed Demon in True Bastion a year ago, but something tells me that it got there later. So, he might be hiding somewhere in that Mirror Maze… it's good that you'll be heading there."

Sunny's smile dimmed a little.

"That guy? How wonderful."

With that, he turned to Cassie.

"He was not hiding in that piece of mirror by chance, was he?"

She shook her head.

"No… Abjuration would have gotten him, and I checked just to make sure on top of that."

Sunny nodded with relief.

"Good. Then… I guess we are done for today. I think we all need some time to digest all this new information."

He looked at Nephis, knowing that the two of them had a lot to talk about... and talk through. But that was better done alone.

Outside the window, the sun was already rising from beyond the horizon.

A new day had come to Ravenheart.

Chapter-2445: Longer Days

About a month later, just before the full moon, Sunny returned to Bastion.

Or rather, another of his incarnations did. The first had actually returned to Bastion weeks ago, but this one took a detour to the frozen wastelands west of Ravenheart first.

There were scouting parties of the Human Domain prowling there in search of Citadels — granted, they neither dared nor could survive going deep into the hellish cold, and only the Saints ventured beyond the outer reaches of the seemingly boundless expanse of ice.

So, Sunny had employed Silent Stalker as a guide... well, more so informed her of the fact that she would be his guide... and the two of them spent several unforgettable weeks together, shivering in the cold and eluding the strange, fearsome Nightmare Creatures who reigned in that frozen hell.

That was how Sunny learned that Silent Stalker was not, in fact, mute. As it turned out, she could talk after all — or, at least, she could hiss and curse like a sailor.

Whatever made the usually taciturn Song princess so expressive all of a sudden… he had no idea.

It was probably the cold.

In any case, eventually, when it became too dangerous for Silent Stalker to follow him, he left her in a shelter he had dug in the ice and continued west on his own. A few days later, a pale and shaken Sunny returned, and the two of them started on the way back to Ravenheart.

From there, Sunny passed through the Dream Gate to Bastion — it

opened regularly, connecting the two largest human cities in the Dream Realm at set intervals.

And here he was.

A mass of people were flowing out of the towering Dream Gate, and he was safely hidden in its middle. Sunny was wearing a ragged robe atop the Nebulous Mantle, having already changed his facial features — members of the Shadow Clan used special Memories for that, but he simply reshaped his avatar a little for the sake of anonymity. Masking his appearance had become much easier after he learned how to grant manifested shadows color in Ariel's Game.

Making himself less handsome felt like a crime against humanity, but what could he do? Such was life… plus, he was a taken man now, so drawing admiring gazes would do him no good.

There was a long, narrow object wrapped in cloth tied to his back, protruding high above his head. Sunny walked as if it was a light as a feather, but in fact, it took all of his Supreme strength not to stagger under the weight of the damn thing. Even the wild shadow he had attached to his feet and controlled to mimic his movements seemed to be sweating from the burden of the object's shadow.

'Holy hell… why is this thing so heavy?'

Letting out a shaky sigh, Sunny allowed the current of the crowd to carry him away from the Dream Gate. Soon enough, he encountered a problem.

Standing on the waterfront, he watched ferries move across the lake. He had to cross the lake, as well, but no ferry would be able to support his weight. At best, the deck would crack beneath him… at worst, the entire ferry would sink, taking the passengers with it.

In fact, the only reason why the ground was not fracturing beneath his feet already was that he was in the Castle, where the cobblestones were made from the same mystical stone as the walls of the great fortress itself.

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Should I just Shadow Step to my destination?'

Failing to come up with a better idea, he went to find a dark alley where no one would notice him vanishing into thin air. It would do no one any good if he was seen using powers similar to those of the Lord of Shadows.

Being dead was such a hassle sometimes.

As Sunny walked, he thought about what had transpired in the past month.

Many things had happened while his incarnation was enduring the cold of the frozen hellscape. Early winter was the busiest time for the Human Domain, after all, because of the winter solstice.

By now, most of the Sleepers who had been infected by the Nightmare Spell last year were either Awakened… or dead. Others were still somewhere out there, in the Dream Realm, making their way to human Citadels. Some had Awakened long before the solstice, having passed through the Dream Gate in advance — in fact, there were many of them, significantly reducing the death toll.

This winter solstice in particular was especially important because it served as proof of concept. It was the second solstice of Neph's reign, but the first one she was able to prepare for — the previous one had happened too soon after the end of the Domain War, when everything was in chaos.

Not that things weren't chaotic now.

Depending on the results of all the measures Nephis and Cassie had taken to ensure that as many Sleepers as possible survived their first journey to the Dream Realm, all following solstices could drastically transform…

There weren't many of those left for humanity, though, since the waking world was going to be consumed by the Dream Realm before too long.

But that was merely the significance of the winter solstice to all of humanity. It was meaningful to Sunny on a personal level, as well —

after all, it was his birthday.

He had turned twenty-eight.

This time, Sunny had enjoyed several birthday parties at the same time — one in the Dark City, with Aiko, his Shadows and incarnations, and the strangely stiff members of the Shadow Clan; one in Ravenheart, with Nephis, Cassie, and Kai; and one with Silent Stalker of all people, who had not seemed enthused about his insistence of celebrating a birthday in the middle of a Death Zone at all.

Sunny still had fun. Actually, he felt quite at home in the company of the quiet Song princess, not the least of all because she reminded him of Saint and Slayer — so, he secretly favored her above other Song sisters, despite the fact that the feline huntress did not seem even a little bit friendly.

It had been a good birthday, still...

Chapter-2446: Lover's Spat

It had indeed been a good birthday.

Actually, Sunny had been a little dejected prior to the winter solstice… that was because Nephis had been giving him the cold shoulder after that heated conversation in the council chamber of the Jade Palace.

He found himself sleeping on the couch for the first time since they got together — well, in a metaphorical sense. In truth, neither of them had slept anywhere after that night, since both were terribly busy due to the approaching solstice. But he could still feel the flimsy walls of the proverbial doghouse around him.

It was not like Nephis was avoiding him or refusing to talk to him, or even behaving that differently — she had just retreated into her former aloof, impassive self. He could feel that she was angry… as well as that she was hurt beneath the anger.

They talked again after that night, trying to express their feelings and thoughts better. But that calmer discussion only managed to define where they stood better, not resolve the fundamental difference in their opinions. So, there was an awkward distance between them for a few days.

Sunny was saddened by that fact… but in a strange way, he was also happy.

To him, it seemed like a good sign.

This was the first fight they had gotten into as a couple — usually, Sunny was too accommodating, and Nephis was too casual about most things. The fact that she was angry this time showed that she cared about him deeply enough to get angry, at least, which was not at all bad. In fact, it was reassuring.

Sunny would have been much more bitter if she had remained unperturbed and indifferent, instead.

As for how he himself felt…

He was tense and anxious. He knew Nephis, and he knew that she would throw herself into the jaws of the Forgotten God without hesitation in pursuit of her goal… of her unquenchable desire.

So, he was afraid to lose her.

That was why the two of them were angry at each other, and that was why they had spent several days apart.

But then, the solstice arrived. And despite how Nephis felt, she suppressed her stubborn nature and made an effort to make the day as pleasant as she could for Sunny.

Their conflict did not magically disappear after that, but the awkwardness dissipated somewhat.

…And yet, even though things once again seemed normal, some distance still remained between them. That gap was narrow and seemingly insignificant, but Sunny had no idea how to breach it.

'Damnation. Why are all my friends single?'

He desperately needed relationship advice, but there were few people he could ask for it — not that fighting ancient gods of Corruption was something many couples encountered as a stumbling block in their relationships.

There was Kim and Luster… but he would be mad to ask for advice from either Luster or the woman who had married Luster.

Which, basically, only left one candidate.

Effie.

'Yeah, no… I'd rather ask Nether for relationship advice.'

And that guy was someone whose failed relationship destroyed the

universe, no less.

Finally finding a narrow and desolate alley, Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Come to think of it, how come almost all my friends are single?'

The answer was both obvious and sad… they were all workaholics.

But how was humanity going to survive if the cream of the crop of its adult population were not busy making hordes of kids?

Shaking his head and chastising his friends mentally, Sunny dove into the shadows, dragging his unbearably heavy baggage with him.

Apart from the solstice, his birthday, and his first quarrel with Nephis… well, his first quarrel with Nephis after they became a couple, at least… other things had happened, as well. The world kept spinning, not waiting for anyone.

Far north, in the Burned Forest, an ocean of rats was currently besieging an endless legion of monstrous millipedes, getting closer and closer to their nests. In the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, one of his incarnations was maniacally altering the design of his future shadowbound Memory to integrate his recent attainments in weaving into the theoretical spellweave.

Another abandoned the Forgotten Shore and was establishing a base in Ravenheart — his experience in Ariel's Game had proven that having almost all his avatars in the north was highly inconvenient during emergencies, so Sunny wanted to enhance his presence south of the Hollow Mountains.

Plus, someone had to guard the Jade Board and the Dollhouse at all times… they had not figured out what to do with these time bombs yet, but keeping them in the Jade Palace was definitely not an option. Sunny had half the mind of tossing at least one of Ariel's creations into the seal containing the Dark Sea, but was not at all sure that it was a good idea.

Cassie, meanwhile, had taken a good look at Kai after the charming archer rested from his experiences in Ariel's Game.

Just as Sunny had expected, the rings of ash empowering his friends had disappeared as soon as the game was over… however, they had not disappeared without leaving a trace.

Kai had a new Attribute now, [Mark of Ash]. This Attribute granted him affinity to ash, whatever that meant — among other things, it increased his already immense resistance to fire, as well as granted him a minor, but scaling augmentation when near intense heat or surrounded by it.

It was nice to know that knowledge and experience… as well as an awesome custom-made bow and a quiver of masterwork enchanted arrows… were not the only things Kai had brought back with him from Ariel's Game. Still, Sunny was of the opinion that his friend deserved way more.

After all, where else would one find a Saint who had slain a Cursed Beast?

Emerging from the shadows on a quiet street, Sunny smiled and headed for a particular manor situated there.

Now that the solstice was behind them… Sunny and Nephis were going to get even busier. He had the new project of enchanting human strongholds in the Dream Realm on his plate, which meant that he and Cassie would be busy with researching sorcery for the foreseeable future, while Nephis was needed on countless battlefields.

Now that the Cursed Demon was dead and she wasn't tethered to Bastion anymore, she would probably take the Ivory Island on a lengthy journey. The Death Zones south of Godgrave had remained an impregnable wall and a source of worry for them until now — Nephis wanted to conduct a proper reconnaissance of them first.

Before that, though, they had to receive a lengthy report from the agents of the Shadow Clan scattered across the two worlds. It had been put off because of the solstice, so now was the time. Aiko seemed to think that things were fishier than usual, as well… they needed to determine if she was correct with haste.

But that was for his other incarnations to worry about.

This one, meanwhile, had a different task.

Sunny was going to search for the fifth fragment of Weaver's lineage here in Bastion... in the true version of Bastion, to be precise.

Chapter-2447: Home Visit

Leaving behind a few cracked cobblestones, Sunny arrived at a particular gate and waited for a while, expecting a giant wolf to come barreling out to engulf him in a hurricane of excitement, enthusiasm, and slobbery puppy love.

However, nothing of the sort happened.

Sunny had been preparing himself to act annoyed, but now, he was strangely disappointed.

'Ling Ling, that brat… does he not smell his favorite uncle standing at the door?'

Sunny waited a bit more, then sighed and raised his hand to knock at the gate. Before he could, however, it opened, revealing the sight of a toned, shapely, and sculpted torso. Sunny studied it for a few moments, then looked up… and then, with a sigh, a little higher still.

Effie was standing on the gravel road barefoot, wearing well-worn, comfy sweatpants and a makeshift crop top with a faded Night&Gale logo that heroically held back her ample figure. Her hair was disheveled, and she was rubbing her eyes while yawning.

Seeing her in such a mundane set of clothes felt a little strange, considering who she was and where they were. But then again, Effie had never been one to care about her exalted status.

Looking over Sunny's head, she gave the street a dubious look.

"Huh? No one is here?"

'Goddammit!'

He gritted his teeth.

"Hey! Stop pretending that you can't see me."

Effie raised her eyebrows and slowly lowered her gaze. Then, she lowered it some more and smiled brilliantly.

"Oh! It's you, Shadow Boy. Sorry, didn't notice you there… and by there, I mean down, down there…"

Sunny furrowed his brow in annoyance.

"How does it even make sense? Sure, let's say you didn't notice me. What about that huge bundle on my back? The one that is three meters long? Only a blind person would fail to notice that!"

Effie looked at the bundled item protruding high above his left shoulder, then scratched her head in embarrassment.

"Well, fine. You got me there... anyway, come in. I was warned that you'd be showing up, so I've been waiting. This is officially my first day of vacation! I didn't even know that I get to have those, you know? Granted, since you are involved, it will probably be a work trip at best... now that I think about it, I think I was swindled out of taking a break..."

Sunny followed Effie past the gate and looked around.

"Huh? Where's Little Ling? And his dad? I was hoping to catch up."

She gave him the side eye.

"Ling Ling is punished and is helping his dad around the farm. Also… I find it weird that you are friends with my husband. Really weird!"

Sunny blinked a few times, aghast and dismayed.

"What? Why? Let me tell you, I am an awesome friend."

Effie nodded energetically.

"Exactly. You are way too awesome! In the literal sense of the word, I mean. You are a Sovereign, for Spell's sake. What business does my husband have being pals with a Sovereign?"

Sunny scoffed.

"That guy is married to a Saint and is raising another. I think he can handle being buddies with a Supreme. Don't sell that guy short... he is just that kind of impressive."

Effie glanced at him, then looked away with a soft smile.

"Okay… that's true. He is indeed a little impressive, isn't he?"

Before they entered the house, Sunny gestured for her to stop and took the bundled item off his back with an audible sigh of relief.

"Wait a bit. I'm not sure that we can take that thing inside."

The grounds of Effie's manor had been treated to be able to support the titanic weight of her Transcendent form — as well as survive Little Ling's overabundant energy — but he wasn't sure about the house. Her husband had built it from the mystical wood from the woods around Bastion, but they were dealing with something truly special here.

Resting the bottom of the bundled item on the ground, Sunny supported its weight with one hand and used the other to massage his hurting shoulder.

"Ah. That's better…"

Effie studied the narrow object with a curious expression.

"What is that thing, anyway?"

Sunny grinned.

"This… is a little gift from me to you."

He lowered it to the ground carefully and then knelt to remove the straps. Of course, both the cloth the item was wrapped in and the straps were made from manifested shadows, so he could have simply dismissed them… but where was the theater in that?

Plus, the more Sunny became akin to a deity, the more he learned to

appreciate these small, human moments. Sure, he could teleport around and make the shadows do everything for him so that he never needed to lift a finger, but walking where he needed to go on his own two feet and doing what he wanted to do with his own pair of hands was its own small pleasure.

As he was unbundling the item, he gave Effie a mischievous smile.

"It's nothing too crazy. I just thought of you when I saw it."

From within the cloth, an imposing spear was revealed. It was around three meters in length, devoid of frivolous adornments but beautiful in design. The great spear was both solemn and resplendent, seemingly forged from pure gold — despite that, it emanated a sense of indescribable fierceness and crushing gravity, inspiring awe and reverence in anyone who glimpsed it.

The spearhead was long, capable of both piercing and severing, while the shaft was flawlessly straight and seemingly indestructible. As soon as the spear was revealed, the air suddenly smelled of a lightning storm, and sparks of electricity arced across the grass.

It felt... ancient, unfathomably powerful, and holy. The world itself seemed to react to the presence of the golden weapon, becoming brighter and solemn around it.

Effie looked at the great spear, enthralled.

"What…"

At that moment, Sunny beamed.

"A beanpole for a beanpole!"

She forced herself to look away from the spear and gave him an unamused look.

"Wanna die?"

Sunny laughed.

Effie studied the spear some more, then asked in a tone of wonder:

"No, really. What is this beauty?"

Sunny shook his head and finally dismissed the shadow cloth. His tone was nonchalant when he explained:

"This… is a divine relic."

Chapter-2448: Divine Armament

Sunny smiled.

"To be precise, this is a divine relic I recovered in the frozen wastelands. And I mean that literally — it is a Divine Armament left behind by a slain god. I almost kicked the bucket to retrieve it, so be a darling and call me da… uncle, call me uncle."

Effie's eyes widened.

Indeed, the great spear that looked like a bolt of obliterating lightning forged into a weapon was a Divine Weapon — it was the spear Sunny had glimpsed in one of the truths revealed to him in Ariel's Game. That truth had shown him Weaver challenging Ariel to a Death Game on a blood-soaked battlefield in a frozen hell… with Ariel inhabiting the body of a dying Divine.

Sunny could remember every detail of that scene vividly…

The endless white plain, the broken corpses of lesser gods, the rivers of ichor flowing into the depths of the frozen ocean, the tendrils of nothingness seeping into reality through the cracks in the shattered sky… the giant kneeling in the middle of the silent battlefield, grasping his fractured head with two enormous hands as he mumbled disjointed words, full of terror.

And a great spear laying on the broken ice, forgotten, still brimming with the echoes of annihilating lightning.

…The giant might have forgotten about his spear before dying, his body swallowed by the imprisoned ocean, but Sunny had not. So, he ventured into frozen wastelands hoping to find it.

Luckily, discovering the battlefield from his vision had not been too difficult — at least not for Sunny, who could cast his shadow sense

across countless kilometers and move with stunning speed. After all, there were not a lot of places where the sky was shattered and tendrils of nothingness seeped into reality, even in the Dream Realm.

Surviving that harrowing place, however… that was an entirely different matter. Thousands of years had passed since the day he saw in the vision of truth, and the entire area had become far more eerie and terrifying, not to mention chillingly lethal, than it used to be.

Everything was swallowed by the ice and bathed in the familiar white mist… only something seemed to be hiding in the mist there, making his skin crawl. The unbearable cold was almost absolute, far worse than even the Winter Beast's blizzard had been.

Sunny had wanted to explore the battlefield thoroughly, but in the end, he barely managed to retrieve the spear from deep within the ice before hastily making a retreat. The spear had been gigantic at first, but as soon as he touched it, it shrank to its current size.

That eerie place, that sense of terrible fear, that cold… was something he wished to never relive.

Looking at Effie, Sunny smirked.

"So, what do you say?"

Enthralled, Effie leaned forward and picked the spear.

"Thanks, uncle-uahh!"

Barely lifting the spear off the ground, Effie toppled over and landed on her face, making Sunny laugh again.

"Oh, sorry! I forgot to mention… it's quite heavy."

Effie herself was also a… top-heavy person. So, it was no wonder that she had lost balance and ended up falling down.

Laying on the ground, she gave him a glare, then stood up and reached for the great spear once again. With a grunt, Effie lifted it after all. Lean muscles rolled under her dewy olive skin, and beads of sweat glistened on her face.

Sunny was not surprised to see her shouldering the crushing weight of the Divine weapon that made even a Sovereign struggle — if anyone had enough raw physical strength to carry the great spear, it was Effie. She studied it with a contemplative expression, then smiled.

"Awesome. However... I don't think I am strong enough to wield it in battle. No Saint is."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"Indeed, no Saint is. Which brings us to the next point of this conversation, and the real reason I'm here. Actually, I feel a bit awkward giving this speech for the second time, but here it goes… Nephis and I are going to attempt Apotheosis sooner or later, which means…"

Effie waved a hand in the air dismissively.

"If you are about to tell me how someone else has to become Supreme before you guys jump into the Fifth Nightmare, no need. Actually, I already met Kai in NQSC, and he regaled me with the tale of your misadventures in the Death Game over some drinks. So, you can skip the explanation. I already know."

Sunny stared at her for a few seconds.

"And?"

Effie placed the golden spear back on the ground and shrugged.

"Sure, I'm in."

He blinked a couple of times.

"That, uh… you know that we are talking about you challenging the Fourth Nightmare, right? Not immediately, I mean — but eventually. That is the reason I took Kai to Ariel's Game, and that is why I want to take you to the Mirror Maze. To help you prepare."

Effie yawned again, then let out a groan.

"Damn it… all this talk of attaining Supremacy, and I haven't even had my morning coffee yet. I said sure, didn't I? Let's do it! Let's get me ready to challenge the Fourth Nightmare… eventually. Preferably after I had breakfast."

Sunny stared at her silently, then shook his head.

"Don't you need time to consider? Only four people in history have survived the Fourth Nightmare, you know."

Effie met his gaze, then smiled faintly.

"Look around."

Sunny did, studying the cozy wooden home and the picturesque grounds of the manor. Effie, meanwhile, picked up the Divine spear and carefully leaned it against a nearby tree.

"I have stuff to protect, Sunny."

It was a very simple answer... but one that said it all.

Brushing the dirt off her sweatpants and her stretched-out crop top, Effie started whistling a cheerful melody as she headed inside.

"Don't dawdle! It's the full moon tonight, so let's grab something to eat and discuss what, exactly, we are going to do in the Mirror Maze. Oh, and also…"

She turned around and smiled.

"Thank you for the spear, really. I mean it."

Then, Effie's smile turned into a grin.

"I mean, I did not know what to expect when you started boasting about the size of your bundle, but when you took that thing out... good heavens! It really..."

Heading into the house, Sunny pushed her inside.

"Shut the hell up!"

Chapter-2449: Dédales

Sunny climbed out of the water and rose to his feet, looking at the desolate, moonlit landscape of True Bastion.

The ruins of the great castle he and Cassie had explored once… were completely gone, melted into a vast, eerily smooth plain of pale rock. Here and there, deep fractures marred its surface, harboring cold darkness. The rock itself was still radiating unbearable heat, making the waters of the lake seethe and boil — swimming to shore had not been a pleasant experience, to say the least.

There used to be a dark, twisted forest on the other side of the lake — now, there was only cinders and ash, with towering bones protruding into the broken sky like charred pillars.

A shattered moon was bathing the devastated land in silver light, reflecting from the restless surface of the dark water… the landscape felt eerie and alien, bearing little resemblance to the bustling city on the other side of the reflections.

The fallen tower where Cassie used to wait for Sunny on their ventures into the Mirror Maze was gone. The walls of the castle were gone, as well — so were the ruins of the main keep that had served the King of Swords as a forge once.

Sunny suddenly was painfully aware of the inevitable, merciless passage of time.

Of course, True Bastion had not been reshaped by time — instead, it had been reshaped by a passing demigod… the Star of Ruin.

A demigod not unlike himself.

The pitiful remains of what had been a Demon's citadel once did not illustrate the eroding power of time — instead, they illustrated his

own daunting power. Sunny was not that different from a force of nature now — in fact, by very definition, he was far more devastating than nature could ever be.

'How odd.'

He sighed deeply and turned into a shadow for a split second, leaving the water soaking his clothes and hair behind. A moment later, completely dry, Sunny assumed his human form again.

"Darn, damn, dammit, damnation, what the actual hell?!"

His quiet contemplation was unceremoniously destroyed by Effie, who chose that moment to rise from the boiling lake, glistening drops of water rolling down the graceful lines of the steel armor that clung to her body like a second layer of skin. The white cloth she wore around her hips and chest stuck to the smooth steel, doing nothing to obscure the stirring shape below.

She flipped her hair back, sending a scattering of droplets flying into the rays of silver moonlight, and looked around with a pout.

"...Kai gets to have awesome hot springs in Ravenheart, but I get to be cooked alive in a boiling lake? I almost became soup! How is that fair? Man… Nephis really did a number on this place."

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah. The ruins are completely destroyed. It's strange, though… she mentioned that there would be no water in the lake, but it seems no different from before."

Effie fanned herself, then gave the vast expanse of fractured stone a peculiar look and shivered.

"Actually, we destroyed most of the ruins with Morgan during the war. We dried out the lake, too — but water must be seeping through the reflections from the other side. It's a bit weird, no? Water flowing from an illusory lake into the real one. Can it even be called an illusion, then?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, it is an illusion created by the Demon of Imagination. Those can very well be more real than reality itself."

He gazed across the dark expanse of water, then peered into its depths.

"There's a drowned city on the bottom of the real lake here, right? But there is nothing like that in our version of Bastion. That is also curious."

Effie sighed, then started heading away from the shore.

"You've been to Rivergate, I presume? Well, there is actually a twin complex of great dams north of True Bastion. This one was utterly destroyed thousands of years ago, though — my theory is that it was by the same blow that shattered the moon and turned Imagination's castle into ruins. That was how the city drowned, I think."

Sunny turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow.

"There is another dam upstream from the Mirror Lake?"

Effie nodded.

"There is in True Bastion, but not in the illusory one. I think both dams were built by the Demon Imagination, and that they had something to do with the Mirror Lake. She seems to have been fond of playing with water, for some reason. It's such an ancient past that there is no way to know for sure, of course."

Sunny's second eyebrow rose, as well.

"Huh? Since when are you interested in exploring ancient history?"

Effie chuckled.

"Since I was put in charge of Bastion? I need to know the background of the city I am meant to rule to avoid unpleasant surprises. Ancient past tends to become present problems quite often here in the Dream Realm."

Sunny sighed.

"I couldn't have put it better myself."

He lingered for a moment, then looked up at the shattered moon and asked:

"Have you ever reached the boundary of this reflection?"

Effie shook her head.

"No, because when we fought here, Morgan had drawn True Bastion into reality to protect the illusory version — it just bordered the surrounding regions of the Dream Realm seamlessly, as if it had always been there. But I imagine that there's just nothing at the edges… something like the boundary of the Beast Farm."

By then, they reached the deepest of the fractures that broke the surface of the mountain — the dark fissure led all the way to the Mirror Maze.

The piece of mirror Nephis had discarded was still laying on its edge, covered in soot.

Sunny picked it up, studied it for a moment, then crushed it in his fist.

Opening the fist to let the wind scatter the fine glass dust, he pointed to the fracture.

"Are you going first, or should I?"

Effie suddenly smiled.

"Oh my! It's not every day that a man invites me to explore a deep cr…"

Sunny smiled too, then raised a hand and calmly pushed her over the edge.

Chapter-2450: Kingdom of Imagination

A little fall was not going to hurt a Saint, and it was especially not going to hurt Effie, whose Awakened Ability made her body as tough as steel. Granted, this particular fall was quite a lengthy one… but in the end, both of them reached the Mirror Maze unscathed, if a little worse for wear and covered in dust.

"Crap… I can't see anything. What a hassle."

Effie complained, but she did not summon a luminous Memory. That was because Sunny had drowned the Mirror Maze in shadows on purpose — this was his tried and trusted method of erasing the infinite reflections from its walls, thus avoiding encountering the Others.

"I suspect that the intended — and therefore the safest — way to explore the heart of this maze is to traverse it across reflections. But since neither of us knows how to deal with the Others, we will just walk like normal people."

He turned to Effie.

"Grab my hand."

He offered her his hand, but she did not take it. Sunny frowned.

"What seems to be the problem? What, are you shy all of a sudden?"

Effie rolled her eyes.

"No, you numskull. I can't see where your hand is!"

Letting out an awkward cough, Sunny grabbed her by the forearm

and pulled her into the darkness.

The Mirror Maze seemed no different from how it had been before, not damaged by the dreadful devastation above at all. Granted, there was more dust on the floor — but other than that, it was in pristine condition.

As they walked through the darkness, Effie seemed to be listening to the sounds of their footsteps intently. Eventually, she asked:

"So, Clan Valor had no idea this place was here?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. It used to be hidden deep underground and protected from usual forms of detection. I barely found it myself… so, neither Warden nor his son knew about the existence of the Mirror Maze, despite spending decades right above it."

Effie remained silent for a bit, then said suddenly:

"But Mordret must have known."

Sunny gave her a guarded look.

Yes… that was the conclusion he had drawn, as well. Mordret could gaze through the mirrors around him and even travel through them — those were his Dormant and Awakened Abilities. So, when young Mordret first returned into the cold embrace of Clan Valor, he would have definitely felt the presence of a vast mass of mirrors beneath True Bastion.

He must have known that the Mirror Maze was here… perhaps he had even been the first human to explore it.

Was he hiding somewhere in the complicated web of twisting tunnels right now?

Sunny did not think so… he did not think that Mordret was in any of the tunnels, that was.

"If he's here, he is probably in the Hall of Imagination. That is where

we are heading, as well."

Effie tensed a little.

"Remind me why we are going there, again?"

Sunny collected his thoughts before speaking.

"Well… you are the master of Bastion, so you know better than anyone what the Great Mirror is. It is situated deep below the castle — its illusory version, that is — in a great underground hall hidden in the heart of the mountain. It is also the nexus of the Component of your Citadel, the one that allows the true and false versions of Bastion to swap places. One stays in reality, while the other one is safely contained within the Great Mirror."

Effie pursed her lips.

"And it also allows the Others to crawl into reality from True Bastion if someone forgets to cover it."

Sunny nodded.

"But actually, I think that we have not even discovered the true Component of Bastion yet."

Effie tilted her head a little.

"Huh?"

Sunny considered his words for a moment.

"Think about it. There is an underground chamber with the Great Mirror below the illusory castle, connected to it by secret passages. But what about True Bastion? There are no passages. Instead, there is the Mirror Maze… and the underground chamber at its heart. The Hall of Imagination, which makes things you imagine real — or at least creates illusions of those things that are seemingly no different from real."

He paused for a moment, then added in a somber tone:

"I did not dare to explore the Hall of Imagination before, so I don't know what is hidden in its center. But if my theory is correct… then there is another Great Mirror there — the true Great Mirror, not an illusion of it that stands below the False Bastion."

Effie frowned in the darkness, just as stunned as the first time he had shared this theory with her.

This time, however, she had a question.

"The Great Mirror... the supposedly illusory Great Mirror leads to True Bastion. Then, where does the true Great Mirror lead?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"That is what we are going to find out."

At that moment, he stopped and looked down, a troubled expression appearing on his face.

Effie almost slammed into him, stopping in time only because she had been listening to the sounds of his steps the whole time.

"What is it?"

Sunny knelt and studied the floor.

"There are footprints in the dust."

He expected to find some sign that Mordret had passed through these tunnels. However, what Sunny had not expected… was that there would be two sets of footprints, one slightly more faded than the other.

And a bit smaller, too.

He remained silent for a while, then said in a surprised tone:

"I think… that both Mordret and Morgan were here before us."

The former princess of Valor had vanished without a trace a few months after the war. Some were convinced that her brother had

killed her, after all, while some simply assumed that she had left to start a new life somewhere, in complete anonymity — after all, being the last heir of a fallen, infamous Great Clan was not the easiest fate.

Some, meanwhile, believed that Morgan had challenged the Fourth Nightmare.

As it turned out, though, she was here, in the Mirror Maze, instead.

Sunny did not know quite what to make of it, let alone how to feel about it.

"How curious."

He was glad that Morgan was still alive, though.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then rose to his feet and continued moving forward while guiding Effie through the darkness.

"Come. We must hurry to the Hall of Imagination."

After a while, she said:

"Wait a minute…"

Effie grabbed his forearm as well, slowly increasing pressure.

"Was that why you did not let me eat the whole day? So that I could not think about anything except food by the time we reach that damn hall?!"

Sunny smiled sheepishly in the darkness.

"Oh, that… well, yes. I think it's going to work out great!"

As for Sunny himself, he had a far simpler way of getting to the heart of the Hall of Imagination without summoning the illusion of some Unholy Titan into existence.

He was going to release control of his incarnation and let his shadow enter in his stead, then retake control at the last moment.

His shadows did, indeed, have minds of their own — but he was pretty sure that the Hall of Imagination had not been designed to make the fantasies of shadows come true. Even if it did, whatever they could imagine was not going to be nearly as terrifying as what Sunny could.

Especially this shadow... the naughty shadow. Its fantasies were pretty transparent, most of the time...

There was only one way to find out for sure, though.

Effie was earnestly trying to crush his forearm in a vice grip, but Sunny simply ignored her — now that he had both the Bone Weave and the Flesh Weave, not to mention the Jade Shell, enduring such pressure was not a big problem.

It still hurt like hell, though!

Effie growled in the darkness:

"Hey, Shadow Boy! If you don't feed me right this moment, I'll eat you… instead?"

Her voice grew quieter and then fell silent, because at that moment, they reached the boundary of the Hall of Imagination.

The walls of the tunnels spread out, opening into a vast open space. It was full of darkness, and neither Sunny's sight nor his shadow sense could penetrate it.

They froze for a while, preparing themselves for the trial of the Hall of Imagination warily.

In the end, he sighed and pulled Effie forward.

"Let's go. The sooner we do… the sooner we can get into some kind of crazy trouble, barely survive it, and return victorious with scary stories to tell."

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"What? Was that supposed to calm me?"

Sunny sighed.

"Yes. You might not know it, but I have a proven track record of doing just that. I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Effie's mouth hung open.

"No, you're not! You are literally dead! Two entire armies saw you kill yourself, and then get killed by Nephis immediately after that!"

Sunny grinned.

"What, was I supposed to die from just that?"

With that, he took a step forward.

They had already discussed the plan earlier, so there was not much left to say.

Sunny positioned himself in the middle of the entrance to the Hall of Imagination, then concentrated and summoned Saint — having at least one Shadow covering for them was probably a wise move, and she was the best choice for this particular trial.

The taciturn knight emerged from the darkness and glanced at him with her usual indifference.

This time, however, Saint's gaze lingered on him for a while longer, as if sensing remnant traces of the Jade Titan persona he had assumed in the Death Game.

Eventually, Saint took her place to his left, while Effie stood to his right.

"Ah. I don't like it…"

She raised a hand to grab his shoulder,

Sunny got ready to temporarily release control of his incarnation, knowing that Effie and Saint would get him to where he needed to be.

"Just think about your favorite food. Actually, I've tried something very delicious recently! Have you ever tried… a barbecued Cursed rat? If not, I cannot recommend roasting one over lava enough..."

Effie sighed deeply, then mumbled a quiet curse and pushed him.

Together, the three of them entered the Hall of Imagination.

Sunny did not remember quite what happened next.

Next thing he knew, he was someplace else...

He was someone else.

Chapter-2451: Mirage City Noir

Sunny dreamed a nightmare.

In that nightmare, he lived in a dying world where grotesque monsters were real, people possessed supernatural abilities, and humanity was on the verge of being snuffed out by the encroaching darkness. The world was one vast battlefield, and every day, countless lives were lost in the bloody battle for survival.

Sunny himself was one of the strongest people in that world, having clawed his way to the pinnacle of power through mud, blood, heartbreak, and thorns of betrayal. He was buckling under the crushing weight of responsibility and carrying the cruel burden of his own past sins.

…He also had a smoking hot, stunning, drop-dead gorgeous girlfriend.

Sunny could somewhat accept the existence of monsters and superpowers, but that last detail had really clued him in to the fact that it was all a dream.

'Ah…'

He was woken up by the blaring sounds of the alarm.

"Wake up, Sunny! Wake up, Sunny! Wake up, Sunny!"

'Shit.'

Grabbing his phone, he fumbled to turn the alarm off and then sat up, looking around with groggy, bloodshot eyes.

His room was dark and messy, full of stale air and empty bottles. The TV was on, showing a colorful commercial for Valor Group's new

extravagant mall. The young CEO was cutting the red ribbon in front of a cheering crowd, his easy smile blinding the camera…

Sunny stared at the TV for a while, deep darkness nestling in his eyes, then tossed his phone at it. The screen shattered, and a net of cracks distorted the smiling face on it, making it seem as if he was staring at a broken mirror.

Sunny was suddenly wide awake.

"Ah, no! Shit!"

He jumped off the bed, sending several empty bottles rolling across the floor, and hurried to the TV. The screen of his phone was cracked, as well, but luckily, it was still in working condition. Sunny checked the time and the date, then let out a relieved sigh and slowly stood up.

Still reeling from the damn nightmare, Sunny muttered a few curses and walked to the window. Opening the shutters, he grimaced from the light and looked outside.

The dim lilac radiance of the early dawn washed over his pale body — his toned muscles, a scattering of scars decorating it like badges of dishonor, and a frightening tattoo of a black serpent coiling around his arms and torso.

...Not exactly what one would expect from a decorated police officer, but Sunny had lived a tumultuous life before finding the straight path.

Outside the window, the city was obscured by a curtain of rain. Cars were rushing to outrun the morning traffic, leaving trails of scarlet glow in their wake. Here and there, red neon crosses stood out against the twilight sky like beacons for lost souls, and all around them, countless shops and restaurants were opening their doors like temples to greed and gluttony.

Above it all, glass skyscrapers stood like towering cathedrals. There, in the bowels of conglomerate offices, dwelled the real power.

The streets were grimy, the apartment buildings were decrepit, and

the people were worn down, confined to the narrow pavements by the traffic while walking to their destinations with glassy eyes.

Something about it all seemed strangely off, as if the world of his nightmares was much more real.

'...There are no barriers surrounding the city.'

It was such a strange thought, and yet, Sunny could not get rid of the feeling that there were supposed to be enormous air filtration barriers on the horizon.

But what for?

'I must have really lost it.'

In any case, the sun was rising above Mirage City.

It was time to face a new day...

Today, Sunny made a reluctant effort to look presentable. He took a shower, shaved, and found the least wrinkled clothes he had. Black jeans, a grey t-shirt, and an inconspicuous jacket… the clothes hid his sharp edge, but there must have still been something in his gaze, because a drunk loitering at the back of the building reeled back from just one glance.

Sunny watched him stagger away with a cold, somber expression. The man seemed like a genuine drunk, but one never knew… it paid to be careful.

Once the swaying figure disappeared around the corner, Sunny climbed into his old, battered car and put the key into the ignition.

As he drove along the city streets, he could not help but think of the dark, desolate coastal highway of the Antarctic Center. No… that had happened in another nightmare. This was reality, so why was he thinking about such dreadful things?

The radio was playing a catchy tune, reminding him that, apart from having a smoking hot girlfriend, he was also friends with a genuine pop star in those dreams. On top of that, he owned a thriving

business, lived in a castle, was watching over a lovable little sister, and… played the flute?

'What the actual hell...'

Dreams were truly a bizarre place.

Sunny was not really a person with a rich imagination, though. How did his subconscious even imagine all these things?

Shaking his head, he stopped at a traffic light and struggled against the paranoid feeling that every driver on the road was staring at him.

Some time later, Sunny reached his destination... it was a prestigious psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of the city.

Locking his car, he walked across a small park to the entrance and showed his pass to the security guard. Many affluent people received treatment in this seemingly idyllic hospital, so security was really tight here — the beautiful building was no different from a fortress, really, and there were many places inside where regular people like himself weren't allowed.

As for Sunny himself, he was not an affluent person. However, he was a civil servant in a situation that put the higher-ups in an awkward position, so they sent him here for mandatory psychiatric counseling.

That had been months ago. And today… today, gods willing, was going to be his last session. If everything went well, he was going to be reinstated and return to work. And just in time — Sunny had a feeling that the bastard he had been pursuing for so long was going to strike again, soon.

As Sunny was let inside, he caught himself on having used the word "gods" — plural — and frowned.

'Get a grip, damn it.'

He could not mess up today.

Soon, he found himself sitting in a comfortable chair and facing his therapist.

His therapist was some kind of big deal in the shrink world despite being relatively young. She was quiet and extremely professional, so despite the mandatory nature of their relationship, Sunny did not dislike her a lot. The woman just sort of sat there silently while he talked about whatever was on his mind most of the time, so there was little to dislike.

Well… there was one thing.

His therapist really had no business being so goddamn beautiful. It was surreal, really, how breathtaking she was — not to mention distracting.

Her skin was pure white alabaster, her eyes were like two onyx gems, and her features were almost inhumanly flawless. It was as though she had not been born, but actually cut from stone by a mad sculptor. As a result, what should have been beautiful looked a bit eerie, instead... haunting, even.

Her usual lack of emotion only made the overall impression more disturbing.

Meeting her indifferent gaze, Sunny forced out a smile.

"Good morning, doc."

She looked at him evenly…

And then smiled softly.

The smile transformed her face, making it utterly tantalizing, almost painful to look at. It was like looking at something holy... a living saint, maybe.

"Good morning, Detective. Would you like a coffee?"

For some reason, Sunny felt a sense of profound wrongness when he heard the hauntingly beautiful therapist talk.

Also, for some reason, he felt compelled to answer her question honestly.

Sunny shrugged.

"Sure. Why not?"

...Like every other calamity in his life, this catastrophe started with the smile of a beautiful woman and a cup of coffee.

Chapter-2452: Red Pool

The coffee tasted heavenly. It was strange, really… Sunny had been suffering from insomnia for a while now, surviving on sleeping pills and still having nightmares every time he did fall asleep. Perhaps as a result, everything felt tasteless to him — but whenever his therapist offered him coffee, he could not help but enjoy it.

"So, where do I start?"

As she opened her notebook to silently take notes, Sunny sighed.

"I don't get those recurrent nightmares often, anymore…"

He still saw them every time he slept, but he rarely slept, so that could hardly be called "often".

"The world is sort of annoying, but I don't get irrationally angry either. It feels like I have a firmer grasp on myself."

He had smashed his TV just this morning, but that anger was perfectly reasonable. There were many good reasons to hate the Valor Group and its CEO.

"...I don't think I really felt paranoid about something since our last session. So, I guess that is an improvement?"

He had considered the best way to kill the supposed drunk in case the man attacked him, earlier this morning, but that was not paranoia. That was just experience, and Sunny would be a fool not to pay attention to strangers around him.

Sunny continued spouting confident half-truths to give the therapist the impression that he was a stable, well-functioning member of society. Someone whom she should give a clean bill of health and never see again. He wasn't sure if his act was fooling the taciturn

beauty, but she did not question his account even once.

He was not sure if she believed him or simply didn't care.

After a while, Sunny found himself simply recounting his thoughts to her without much pretense.

"I am bored. I am restless… I want to get back to work. I tried doing things that normal people do in their free time, like going on a picnic or taking a walk in the park. But it has been raining the whole damn month. Staying inside is infuriating because of all the bullshit on the news, and I can't really go to a bar, can I? You told me not to mix sleeping pills with alcohol. I feel like... I'm missing something that I never had. So…"

He hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"Can't you just pass me, doc? We both know that I am only here to comply with what the judge said. And the judge only sent me here to comply with people paying for his vacation home."

Of course, Sunny had failed to disclose a few important facts about himself to his beautiful shrink.

For example, the fact that he sometimes felt like his nightmares were the actual reality.

Or that he sometimes believed himself to be the only real person in the world.

Or that he sometimes hallucinated foreign sights, sounds, and sensations, as if he possessed multiple bodies. That was probably because he often spaced out for a few seconds because of the insomnia, falling into bouts of microsleep.

Little stuff like that.

The therapist looked at him with her usual aloof expression.

"Do you think you are mentally fit to resume work, Detective?"

Sunny laughed, hiding the literal shivers her sonorous, enthralling

voice sent running down his spine. It was probably a good thing that his therapist did not speak a lot… her voice was just as dangerous as her looks, if not more bewitching.

He shook his head.

"Me, mentally fit? God, no. But who the hell is, anyway? I mean… with the way the world is, wouldn't it be stranger if I was perfectly fine? I'd definitely turn around and run if I ever met a person who seemed happy, healthy, and completely sane."

She studied him for a while, then nodded and closed her notebook.

"Alright, Detective. To be honest, I am not a fan of mandatory counseling myself. Despite the circumstances, however, you did show considerable progress in these few months we have been seeing each other. So, I am ready to report that you are fit to resume service… on one condition."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised. This was probably the most he had heard her talk ever since they met.

"What's that?"

The therapist studied him for a while, then said in her usual aloof tone:

"I want you to continue therapy even after you are reinstated… in fact, I insist that you do. You are my patient, and I dislike the idea of leaving things unfinished. I abhor it."

Sunny chuckled.

"So… either I continue to see you, or I can't go back to work? How is that different from mandatory counseling?"

She shrugged.

"You can refuse."

He remained silent for a few moments, then scoffed.

"I am sorry, doc, but you seem to be overlooking something. These sessions were being billed to the Mirage City Police Department. If we continue to see each other after my mandatory therapy is over, though, I'll have to pay for the sessions myself. And I am very sorry to say this… but you are way out of my price range."

A peasant like him would not even be let near this exclusive hospital in normal circumstances, let alone receive treatment here.

His therapist gave him an impassive look, then sighed and reached into her pocket. Producing a beautifully embossed business card, she offered it to him with a graceful gesture.

"This is my personal number. We can work something out."

Sunny received the card with a stunned expression and looked down at it.

'...Saint? No way, that's her actual name?'

The saintly therapist was actually called Saint. Learning that fact, Sunny really felt crazy for a moment.

Plus, she was giving him her number…

Pushing silly thoughts out of his head, Sunny looked at the aloof beauty and cleared his throat.

"Well, alright. I'll call you when things settle down a little, doc."

With that, he put her card into his wallet and stood up.

"Thanks for everything… I guess."

She nodded indifferently, already turning away to start filling out the necessary paperwork.

"Don't forget to get your sleeping pills from the pharmacy. Good sleep is the foundation of mental health, Detective. Be well."

A few moments later, Sunny found himself outside her office, somewhat lost. He had not expected that getting the stone-faced

shrink to give him the clean bill of health would be so easy.

'It turned out great, though?'

Shaking his head, he went to the pharmacy situated on the lower floor of the hospital to get his prescription.

…It was when he was waiting for the pharmacist to fill it, listening to the rain pattering against the window, that there was a loud sound of something heavy falling nearby.

Then, a piercing scream shattered the silence.

As Sunny turned around, he saw several tall, muscular orderlies running to the source of the noise with troubled faces.

"Hurry!"

"She got out again!"

"How the hell is she…"

He lingered for a while, watching them disappear behind a heavy door, then separated himself from the wall he had been leaning on and followed.

Behind the door was one of the areas of the hospital where casual visitors weren't allowed. The dimly lit corridor was a complete mess, with several people struggling to get someone whom Sunny could not see behind them to the floor.

Just in front of him, he saw an overturned wheelchair, its wheel still spinning…

And a pool of red, vivid, glistening blood slowly spreading across the floor.

At the heart of the pool was a kneeling nurse who was crying loudly while clutching at her face, red streaks running between her fingers and painting her white uniform into a striking shade of vermilion.

At that moment, one of the brawny orderlies was tossed back,

colliding with the wall with enough force to make the floor shake.

"D—damn it! How is she… so strong!"

"Hold her down, shit!"

"Don't hurt her, you idiots! We're all done for if she gets hurt!"

Sunny could finally see the cause of the mayhem.

The person whom four muscular orderlies had been struggling to contain… was a slender woman with wavy black hair and a pretty, but cold and sharp face. She was wearing a shredded straitjacket and resisting the orderlies with an amount of strength unexpected from someone of her build and constitution, clearly unhinged.

Strangest of all, though…

Was the fact that her eyes were of bright, vibrant red color.

Just like the blood on the floor.

Humans were not supposed to have vividly red eyes, but no one seemed to notice or pay it any attention.

By then, the orderlies finally managed to push the woman to the ground and were in the process of tying the sleeves of her straitjacket back up. She had been resisting them, still… until her gaze fell on Sunny.

He froze.

'Why… why does she look so familiar?'

The woman's eerie red eyes widened a little when she saw him.

And then, she suddenly laughed.

Her laughter resounded across the corridor, growing louder and louder until it drowned out the pitiful whimpers of the injured nurse.

The crazy woman seemed to be incredibly amused all of a sudden. She seemed to be having the time of her life.

Taking a step back, Sunny pursed his lips and turned around.

'Just another psycho.'

There were too many of those around, these days.

As he was walking back to the door, however, her laughing voice washed over him:

"Kill him! You can actually kill him here! Find… Athena!"

Shaking his head, Sunny shut the door behind him and tried to calm his wildly beating heart.

The stench of blood was still stuck in his nose, making his hands tremble.

The sight of it…

'Damn it.'

Although Sunny knew that mixing sleeping pills with alcohol was a terrible idea, he suddenly really craved a drink.

Chapter-2453: Ex Nihilo

When Sunny left the psychiatric hospital, the world was still being pelted by rain. The sky was discharging a seemingly endless deluge of water, as if wishing to drown the city below.

The gutters were overflowing, and the pedestrians were clinging to the sides of the streets, afraid to be given a cold shower by the cars that rushed by.

Looking up, Sunny closed his eyes and offered his face to the rain, feeling the flowing water washing away the scent of blood from his nostrils.

'At least the city will be cleaner because of the rain.'

But then, there would be heat and humidity. The heat never reached the roots of the city, though — there, in the damp darkness, everything that the water had washed away would begin to rot. The rot would give birth to vast swarms of vermin…

Standing there with his eyes closed, Sunny smiled.

'Swarms of vermin, huh.'

As if this city had not already been infested by the worst kind of vermin of them all.

People.

Human vermin thrived in dark places, too, and just like trash, they were thoroughly rotten away from the light.

Shaking his head, he walked to his car across the puddles. As he did, the image of the laughing woman with vermilion eyes surfaced in his mind. Why did he feel like he had seen her somewhere?

Considering the usual clientele of the hospital, she had to be a scion of a wealthy family. Sunny rarely brushed sides with people like that, so he struggled to imagine where they would have met… unless, of course, he had seen her in a nightmare.

A person with vibrant red eyes was exactly like something he would dream of. But how would a woman he had never met end up in his dreams?

'I wonder whom she wanted me to kill.'

Sunny sighed.

Wealthy people usually ended up in an asylum for two reasons — either their family wanted to get rid of them, or they were junkies. Considering the woman's age and unhinged behavior, the latter was more likely. Granted, she could have been drugged up as a result of being put in a psychiatric hospital, not the other way around… but that was none of his business.

'Find Athena?'

Wasn't Athena some kind of pagan goddess? Where would he even find someone like that?

'Come on. You are not seriously thinking about what some crazy lunatic said, are you?'

Sunny pursed his lips as he climbed into his car.

He was pretty sure that he was hallucinating again — that was probably the reason the woman's eyes seemed vividly red. Insomnia and sleeping pills made it hard for him to differentiate dreams from reality sometimes, and the sight of blood was an old trigger.

So, did he really have ground to stand on when calling someone a lunatic?

As he was turning the key in the ignition, his phone rang. Glancing at the cracked and shattered screen, he smiled darkly and took the call.

"Yes. Yeah… what, did he expect to get rid of me so easily? Sorry to

disappoint, then. I'll be there today."

Then, he paused for a moment, his tone changing subtly.

"So, there's a new body… my, my, my. It is as if someone wanted to welcome me back."

Ending the call and throwing the phone on the seat, he looked forward with a grim expression.

"...Wait just a little bit more, bastard. I'll find you."

The car growled quietly and sped away, wading through the rain.

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"You must have really lost your mind, Detective. No, you really are crazy. How the hell did you pass the psych evaluation? Hey, you little shit. Look at me. Am I a joke to you?"

Sunny, who was sitting in the office of the Homicide Division's Captain, looked at the grizzled old man in front of him and smiled.

"A bit, yes."

The man stared at him in shock.

"What did you just say? Hey, Sunny… I could have put your crazy ass in prison for the stunt you pulled off back then. You know that, right? Bastard, you are only sitting here right now because of my respect for the former captain, who held you in high regard. What did she see in you, I have no idea, but I am in charge now. So, you are going to treat me with respect. Do you understand?"

Sunny nodded.

"I said that you are, indeed, a bit of a joke to me. I don't know that you could have put me in prison. And yes, I understand."

He regarded the new captain somberly.

The man was a veteran of the Mirage City Police… but he had been

put in charge of the Homicide Division recently, and it was not for a stellar track record or capability. It was because the new captain was a man who knew his place and was trusted to make life easier for the higher-ups.

In other words, he knew how to look the other way when needed. The man was not always corrupt, but he could be when orders to be corrupt came from above.

Back then, Sunny had indeed made a mess that could have landed him in prison. However, that case was an extremely public one, and getting rid of him would have spelled a political nightmare. So, this aging man was put in the freshly empty seat of the captain and told to make the noise go away quietly. So even if he had wanted to get rid of Sunny permanently, he couldn't have.

Sunny did not care one way or the other, though.

"Well, anyway, I'll say it again. The body that was discovered by the river this morning? Put me in charge of that case, please… sir."

The old man ground his teeth.

"Why the hell would I give that case to you, of all people?! Are you positively insane, you little fiend?!"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, making the Captain shiver slightly, then grinned.

"I am not insane. I have a paper to prove that I'm not, in fact. As to why you'll put me on that case — you know the answer as well as I do… sir. It's because, unlike the rest of your more compliant subordinates, I will actually solve it. You must be being pressured real bad to catch the bastard by now, aren't you? Once the press catches wind that there's a seventh victim, that pressure will only grow."

The captain looked at him somberly.

Mirage City was a diseased place at the best of times, but lately, it had been plagued by a new, vile malady...

That malady was a demented, but insidious serial killer who left mutilated bodies in his wake while avoiding capture like a ghost.

The Nihilist.

Chapter-2454: Lone Wolf

The Nihilist… was the stupid name the journalists had given the unhinged predator who stalked the dark alleys of Mirage City.

The killings seemed random, but were too flawlessly executed to be anything except meticulously planned. The murderer did not discriminate in choosing victims, either, so the whole city was on edge.

The incident that had led to Sunny being sent to mandatory counseling, as well as to the new captain's sudden promotion, were connected to the Nihilist, as well.

'Shit. Even I am starting to call him by that idiotic name.'

Not only did Sunny hate the idea of giving a sick, cowardly loser a name as pompous as that, but it was also somewhat of a personal sleight to him. The killer left absolutely no traces behind and chose his victims through a seemingly meaningless process, so the newspapers had invented an ominous moniker — the Nihilist — to draw more attention to the story and sell more copies.

Every time a new victim was found, their advertising revenue exploded. Politicians, meanwhile, gave impassioned speeches to build populist platforms while simultaneously introducing invasive laws under the false pretense of ensuring public safety to tighten their control over people. Many ghouls were reaping benefits from the gruesome deaths of the serial killer's victims…

But enough was enough.

The same politicians who had used the public panic to score points would start to look like fools if the Nihilist wasn't caught soon. The press could not keep selling the same story over and over again without losing the public's interest. And people in law enforcement

who had climbed the career ladder with promises of swift results were growing more and more desperate to produce them.

So, no matter how much the new captain disliked and was threatened by Sunny, he could not do anything about it.

Because Sunny was indeed the best detective in the division, by far. He had come up through the ranks fair and square, first as a beat cop, then as a detective in the Organized Crime Division… naturally, he made more than a few enemies in the deeply corrupt and rotten Mirage City Police as a result.

The fact that he had never been demoted or dismissed was the best proof of how good he was at his job. Although his methods were often messy, Sunny always brought results.

The new captain glared at him silently, seething with fury. But Sunny did not care — he was going to catch the Nihilist, and a mere sycophant was not going to stop him.

"So… can I go take a look at the crime scene before rain washes everything away? Sir."

The old man ground his teeth, then cursed loudly.

"Fine! I'll give you the case, damn it! Be warned, though — if you fail to bring that sick bastard in, it will be your head flying. I'll feed you to the newspapers and make you a proper scapegoat. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Sunny shrugged with a derisive smile.

"What else is new? I'll get going then."

The captain leaned forward.

"Not so fast, asshole. I said that I'll give you the case, but I didn't say that there would not be strings attached. In fact, I have a condition."

Sunny let out a long sigh.

"Why does everyone want to give me conditions today? Captain…

you're not going to slip me your number too, are you?"

The old man scoffed.

"What the hell are you even… actually, never mind. You can have the case, but I'll be assigning you a partner. Someone has to watch your back, anyway — lest the recent incident repeat itself."

Sunny frowned deeply, then said with a hint of barely contained anger in his voice:

"Like hell you will. You know I work alone, Captain."

The captain stared at him with wide eyes.

"What kind of bullshit are you spouting? Have you hit your head repeatedly on something hard, Sunny? You work alone... what? I don't care what your preference is, this is Mirage PD. There are rules that even bastards like you have to follow."

He shook his head, then sighed and waved his hand.

"If you are worried that it's someone I am sending to spy on you, don't. This is a... different kind of situation. She's a good kid — a former national athlete with a rousing story of overcoming adversity. She's the pride of the nation, the pride! You get it? We were all celebrating when someone like that enrolled in the Police Academy!"

The old man sighed wistfully.

"She graduated first in her class, too, and did exceptionally well as a patrol officer. As a result, she was on a fast track to making detective before, well… anyway, now that she is back from an extended maternity leave and freshly promoted to the Homicide Division, I want you to show her the ropes. And be nice about it!"

Sunny studied the captain dubiously.

"Actually, I don't get it. That's the whole reason?"

The old man looked at him with distaste, then sighed again.

"Well... and she looks great on a poster. Not that a thug like you will understand the importance of a clean and stirring image. So, when the reporters besiege you — and you know they will, considering the case — I want you to plant her firmly in front of the cameras and take a step back. Better yet, take three steps and get out of the shot, your morose bastard. You don't like dealing with public relations anyway, so it's a win-win."

He leaned forward and added in an even tone:

"In any case, it's not a discussion. It's an order. Either you take a partner and play ball, or I'll give the case to someone else."

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at the old man darkly.

'So, he wants me to bring some washed-out mom around and let her stand in front of the cameras?'

Everything inside Sunny rebelled against the idea of bringing someone whose only worth was looking comely into the hunt for the Nihilist. But he understood that if there was one thing the higher-ups cared about, it was the visuals.

A national athlete — with some kind of inspirational story, no less — choosing the Police Department was a big win for the PR Division. Now that she was a proper family woman and a devoted mother, to boot, they were all probably salivating.

Softening the image of the traditionally rough and gruff, predominantly male-dominated police force was candy those scumbags could not resist.

So what if he had to carry dead weight around? Babysitting a weak, useless, and soft rookie was not the worst punishment.

And if that poster girl… well, poster mom… ended up actually dead as a result, it would be on her. Not on him.

Sunny cursed quietly and then nodded.

"Fine. As long as she doesn't get in my way, I won't send her back to play house."

The captain gave him a long look.

"Great. She'll be waiting for you at the crime scene. Now, get the hell out of my office!"

Sunny stood up and did just that, already thinking about what he would find at the scene of the murder.

'That damn rain…'

Water could wash away the blood, and at times, it could even wash away the corpses.

But it could not wash away sin.

Cleansing the city of sin was Sunny's job, and he was quite good at it — even if, in the process, more blood was spilled.

Chapter-2455: Floodgates

The usually calm river had swelled, the turbulent grey waters climbing high up the desolate shore. The shore itself had become a muddy mess, with its usual liveliness gone. A large area was cordoned off by police tape and hidden behind a scattering of vehicles parked in front of it, with a small crowd of passerby freezing in the rain behind the tape to satiate their curiosity.

The blinking lights of police sirens gave the scene an ominous, anxious hue.

Climbing out of his car and raising the collar of his jacket to prevent the rain from seeping in, Sunny looked up with a dark expression.

The sky was heavy and dark, shedding tears with no reprieve. That was not what attracted his attention, though.

The idle onlookers crowding behind the police tape did not worry him, but the body had been found close to a bridge. There was a second crowd on that bridge now, busy snapping photos with their phones — from there, they had a perfect vantage point to the body laying on the edge of the water.

'...Damn ghouls.'

It could not have been a coincidence that the body had been dumped here. Either the Nihilist dropped it off the bridge, or he simply wanted people to appreciate his work. If it was the latter, he had found a highly receptive, enthusiastic audience.

Catching a patrol officer who was rushing past, Sunny pulled him back.

"Which asshole…"

The cop turned around with an angry expression, but then paled and took an involuntary step back.

"D—detective Sunny, sir! You… you're here?"

Sunny glared at him for a few moments, then nodded toward the bridge and said in a low, even tone:

"Are you blind or something? Yes, I am here. So, grab a few friends and go clear the pedestrian section of the bridge off, then block it. Bastard, do I need to tell you how to do your job?"

If there had been any evidence left on the bridge, it was for sure destroyed by now. Someone deserved to be fired for this negligence, but Sunny knew that nobody would.

The cop trembled, then saluted and swiftly disappeared from view.

Shaking his head, Sunny climbed under the police tape and headed to the crime scene while putting on black latex gloves. There was a particularly large group of people crowding near the water, blocking his view — he knew that the body was there.

As he was approaching, he could hear them talking in hushed voices:

"Did you hear? Sunny is coming back today."

"Who?"

"Oh, right… you're new. You wouldn't have met him yet."

"But who is Sunny, though?"

"Fool, don't you know anything? You can cross anyone in Mirage Police, but you must never, ever cross that guy. He's fully insane, and not in a good way."

"Sunny, Sunny… w—wait, do you mean him? The Devil Detective?!"

"Ah, so you do know about him. Well, I guess there's hope for you, still. Don't anger the Devil, man."

"Oh, come on… most of the stories they tell about him have to be lies. I bet I can take him, if push comes to shove."

"Damn, you turned out to be a moron. Listen… that one time, back in the day when he was in the Organized Crime Division, the boss of the Red Frog gang put a huge bounty on his head. So, twenty or so thugs cornered him in an underground market at night, all armed with knives and baseball bats. Do you know what happened next?"

"W—what?"

"A proper bloodbath is what happened. I was one of the first officers to arrive at the scene, so I saw it myself… when we opened the doors, it was like a slaughterhouse, man. He took them all down — a bunch died on the way to the hospital, the rest were crippled for life."

"Twenty men? Come on… no way…"

"Shit, I was there, okay? He just walked out of that carnage, looking like a demon from hell, gave me a nasty glare, then got into a car without saying a word and drove straight to the bar where the Red Frog headquarters were. The next day, their boss surrendered himself to the police with a box full of evidence… well, what was left of their boss did, at least."

Ignoring the whispers, Sunny unceremoniously pushed his way through the crowd of people. The cops grew silent when they saw him, moving to make way.

Noticing someone he knew well, Sunny asked in a somber tone:

"Where's the medical examiner?"

The man coughed a few times.

"Detective Sunny, sir… welcome back!"

Sunny just stared at him, making the man shiver.

"I asked you a question, didn't I?"

The cop lingered for a few moments, then sighed and gestured to the

river.

"There is minor flooding in several areas further downstream, so lots of our guys are delayed by traffic jams. They'll be here soon… but we have a bit of a problem, sir. The water keeps rising, you see. The body was already found halfway in the river, but if it is not moved soon, the current might just carry it away. The other detective has been waiting to…"

Sunny cursed and waved the man away.

Walking through the mud, he approached the corpse. It was indeed laying on the very edge of the water, already submerged halfway. All Sunny could see were the dead man's legs and the lower section of his torso.

Leaning down, he grabbed one of the corpse's legs and dragged the body out of the water.

A ghastly, bloated face was revealed, missing both eyes.

'Shit…"

Just as Sunny was about to take a better look, an easygoing voice resounded from behind, making him stop.

"Hey! Hey, buddy, what the hell are you doing? This is a crime scene, for fuck's sake. Who let a random civilian wander in?"

The voice was unfamiliar and female.

'So, this is the dead weight, then.'

Exhaling through gritted teeth, Sunny straightened and turned around, looking at the woman with a chilling expression.

Well, or at least he had planned to.

Instead, he froze for a moment… then slowly looked up.

And then a bit more up.

His eyes widened a little.

'What… the actual hell? This is the washed-out mom?!'

Chapter-2456: Short Cop, Tall Cop

When Sunny was informed that his new partner was a freshly promoted detective returning to work after an extended maternity leave — and one being pushed by the higher-ups for PR reasons, no less — he had imagined a comely woman who was well-suited to push the narrative of family values and nurturing care.

A maternal figure to soften the harsh image of the unpopular Mirage PD.

That woman standing in front of him, however…

Was so thoroughly not what he had imagined that he was stunned for a brief moment.

'H—huh?'

First of all, she wasn't just standing there… she was positively towering above him, as well as above the rest of the policemen gathered on the muddy shore. One of her ancestors had to have married a troll, or maybe an ogre — some kind of a mountain giant, for sure. Otherwise, he could not explain her staggering height.

Despite her questionable ancestry, though, the woman did not look like a troll. Instead... she looked like a supermodel. In fact, she was absolutely stunning, with a captivating face and a figure so gorgeous that it bordered on being deadly.

And as if that was not enough, her well-proportioned athletic body was perfectly sculpted, with lean muscles that put even Sunny to shame. The woman was wearing an unassuming athleisure outfit and a raincoat, but he could tell how terribly in shape she was.

It was as if a goddess had stepped down from a painting.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, slowly reevaluating his opinions of his rookie partner.

'Looks great on a poster, huh?'

He might have been a little wrong about the new captain.

The man knew what he was talking about.

Frowning deeply, Sunny raised a hand and beckoned the woman to lean down. She glanced at him with amusement, then obliged, hiding a paper bag she had been holding behind her back.

"What?"

When her face was close enough to hear whisper, Sunny said loudly:

"Do I look like a civilian to you, moron?! I am investigating the body!"

With that, he pulled out his badge from under the jacket and shoved it up under her nose.

She easily dodged the badge and looked at it in confusion. Then, the gaze of her beautiful hazel eyes shifted back to Sunny, full of disbelief.

She seemed genuinely dumbfounded.

"Wha… you? You're the Devil Detective? But you're… you're tiny!"

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

Behind his bombshell partner, there was a choir of frightened gasps.

"Oh no, oh no… we're all done for."

"He's going to kill her now, isn't he?"

"No! Not Detective Effie!"

"Should we call another ambulance?"

Sunny exhaled slowly through gritted teeth, then opened his eyes and looked at his supposed partner.

"Yes, I am. And you… what's your name?"

The woman seemed to have regained her composure. She straightened, saluted, and then gave him a brilliant smile.

"It's Effie! I'll be in your care, then!"

With that, she offered him her hand for a handshake.

Sunny stared at the offered hand for a few moments, then turned away and concentrated on the corpse.

"Shut the hell up and don't get in my way, Effie. Stay where you are and observe silently."

She lingered, then retracted her hand and sighed.

"So grumpy…"

Ignoring the woman, Sunny knelt near the corpse and studied its hideous, mutilated face. It had not been damaged too much by the water, but both of the dead man's eyes were missing…

That was the Nihilist's signature.

Each of the seven victims had been killed in a unique way, but all of them were missing their eyes. The sick bastard took them for an unknown reason.

The prevailing theory was that he was collecting them as trophies.

Sunny was studying the body intently, a little thankful that he did not have to hear retching noises behind him. He had fully expected the rookie detective to become violently sick at the sight of the Nihilist's latest victim, but the recently promoted mom detective seemed to be taking the hideous corpse in stride.

No, actually…

There were strange sounds coming from behind him, after all.

Turning around in displeasure, Sunny opened his mouth to say something… and froze for the second time today.

His unasked-for partner was standing where he had told her to stand. Her paper bag was open, and she was holding a half-finished sandwich in one hand, chewing with enthusiasm.

Sunny stared at her in disbelief.

"You're… eating?"

His partner grinned sheepishly.

"Oh… sorry! I have a fast metabolism. So I snack a lot."

'What the hell is wrong with this woman?'

Sunny stared at her for a while longer, then shook his head and turned back to the corpse.

"Bon appétit, I guess."

As he reached forward to move the dead man's head a little, the woman asked:

"What are you looking for, anyway? The cause of death is obviously strangulation. Those bruises on his neck are from the killer's fingers. The guy seems quite athletic, so to strangle him this way… takes a lot of strength. The Nihilist usually works with blades, right? I don't think he ever used brute strength before. Can it be a copycat?"

Sunny grimaced, then let out a long sigh.

"Did I not say to be quiet?"

He continued exploring it carefully.

"...I am looking for anything I can find. And it's not a copycat. The eyes were removed with the same surgical precision, which is not

something just anyone can do. Plus, we never disclosed this detail to the press. And that bastard does not work with blades. He works with whatever is at hand. His MO is constantly changing, almost as if he likes to be inventive."

His partner whistled.

"Are we sure that the Nihilist is a man, by the way? I thought there were no clues."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

"Not sure. But statistically, most serial killers are men. And… who said that there were no clues?"

At that moment, he was holding one of the dead man's hands and checking under the sleeve.

Suddenly, Sunny grew motionless.

"Shit."

His partner seemed to have finished her sandwich. Coming closer, she looked down over his shoulder and asked in a curious tone:

"What is it?"

There, on the dead man's pale skin…

A little black snake was tattooed, coiling around his arm.

Sunny winced.

"It's a gang tattoo. This guy used to run with the Black Snakes."

Chapter-2457: Crash Course

It did not take long to identify the victim after discovering the tattoo. His data was in the system due to several juvenile offenses — as for the crimes he had been caught committing as an adult, there were none, because the poor guy was barely an adult.

"Gods. He's a kid."

Sunny gave his new partner a dark look.

'...Did she just say "gods", plural?'

Or had he heard wrong?

Come to think of it, his poster girl of a partner looked terribly familiar. He felt like… no, he was convinced that he had seen her in his nightmares, and quite often at that. How could he have dreamt of people he had never met before, though?

Sunny sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly, feeling both exhausted and incapable of falling asleep.

'Get a grip, damn it… you really are going crazy.'

"Yeah, well. The gangs like to recruit them young."

He would know. He had been one such underage thug himself, once.

The medical examiner finally arrived, and Sunny beckoned Effie away. Taking off his gloves, he tossed them into a trash bin, missed, then came back with a stifled curse to pick them up and put them into the bin properly.

"Let's go. We're done here."

His unreasonably gorgeous partner… Effie… looked around in

confusion.

"Aren't we going to look around some more? Question the person who discovered the body, check for discarded evidence in the bushes, and so on?"

Sunny gave her a disgruntled glare.

"There's no point. The body was either thrown down from the bridge or carried here by the river — in any case, the murder happened somewhere else. The patrol officers will examine the scene and question the witnesses. I doubt they'll find anything, though. The Nihilist is quite meticulous."

He walked over to his car, unlocked the door, and gestured to the passenger's seat.

"Get in."

Effie gave the ramshackle car a dubious look, then sighed and squeezed herself inside. By the time Sunny climbed into the driver's seat, she was already chomping on another sandwich, which seemed to have appeared out of thin air.

Where was she hiding them?

"Wow, partner. I must say… I haven't seen a crappier vehicle in a while. Where did you get it, a museum?"

Sunny started the car, then answered in an indifferent tone:

"Impound lot auction."

This unassuming black car had served him faithfully for the better part of a decade. It might have looked like it had seen better days... and drove like it was dreaming of going to car heaven... but it was still fast and reliable. He trusted it more than he trusted most people.

Effie laughed.

"That checks out. Well, anyway… that psycho, the Nihilist. He's really something, huh?"

The corner of Sunny's eye twitched.

"What he is is a pathetic loser. Nothing more, nothing less."

His new partner raised an eyebrow.

"The whole city is being terrorized by him, and despite that, the whole police force can't seem to catch him. How is he a loser?"

Sunny looked at her briefly, then turned back to the road.

"I am not going to give you a crash course in criminal profiling, but you need to know one thing about serial killers — despite how much the media likes to turn them into some kind of great and sinister figures, fundamentally, they are all pathetic losers."

His expression darkened.

"Most of them are products of childhood abuse, mental or physical — usually perpetrated by their mothers. So, they are either working up to committing some kind of perverse matricide, making up for losing their chance to commit it, or trying to relive the rush of having committed it. There's more nuance to it, of course, but basically… they're disgusting. Oh, and by the way, they are not only losers, but also cowards. Most serial killers choose victims who are weaker than them and don't pose a threat — women, children, the elderly… you get the picture."

He remained silent for a while, then let out a resentful sigh.

"Of course, that bastard, the Nihilist, does not exactly fit these criteria. There is no apparent pattern to how he chooses victims, which means that they most likely do not serve as a surrogate for the person he really wants to kill. More than that, he goes after everyone and anyone, weak or strong. His killings appear both premeditated and impulsive… so, trying to profile him is all but useless. Hell, we might as well throw the entire book away when dealing with him."

Effie finished her sandwich with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"So, how are we going to find out who he is?"

Sunny turned his head and studied her for a while.

Eventually, he looked away and said evenly:

"We don't need to find out who he is. I already know who he is. We just need to find concrete evidence to put him behind bars."

Effie seemed stunned.

"What? You know who the Nihilist is?"

Sunny looked ahead, his eyes turning cold and murderous.

"...Yeah. I do."

She remained silent for a while, studying him with a strange expression.

"How come no one else knows, then? Isn't he supposed to be a complete mystery?"

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"Your second question answers the first. No one knows who he is because no one is supposed to know."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then frowned.

"Somebody is suppressing the information? Wait… is someone covering for him?"

Sunny glanced at her, wondering if she was being sincere or simply pretending not to know. For some reason, he felt inclined to trust his new partner… which was not at all like him. However, she had been pushed onto him by the superiors, which put her true allegiances under question.

Eventually, he shrugged.

"Someone is covering something, that is for sure. As for who and why — don't ask questions about things you are not qualified to learn, rookie. You'll live longer."

She opened her mouth to retort, but before she could, he added in a cold tone:

"Evidence. Without evidence, nothing you and I might think we know matters. So, keep an open mind and follow the evidence — inheriting my suspicions will only cloud your judgment."

Effie gave him a long look, then giggled.

"Wow, partner! You almost sounded like a real detective just now!"

Sunny grimaced.

"What the hell are you talking about? I am a real detective."

She remained silent for a while, studying him with a strange expression. Her mask of carefree nonchalance seemed to crack a little, revealing a hint of the keen and astute person hiding beneath.

Eventually, Effie leaned back and asked something odd:

"Hey. Do you… do you really not remember?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, confused.

"Remember what?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"Who you are?"

He frowned deeply.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

"Are you drunk or something, fool? I am Sunny, a detective from the Homicide Division of Mirage PD. Your senior."

Effie studied him for a few moments more, then smiled sheepishly, seeming perfectly laid-back and easygoing once again.

"Sorry, senior! I meant… you're the infamous Devil Detective, after all! That's all."

'What a weirdo.'

Letting out an amused scoff, Sunny pressed a little harder on the gas.

He didn't mind weirdos.

To be honest, he was not the most sane person himself.

Chapter-2458: Black Snake Gang

The car had left the more prosperous part of the city and entered the poorer parts. The buildings were older and more ramshackle here, the streets were narrower, and the people were dressed in cheaper clothes. The terrain of the city was uneven, littered with hills and mountains — more so here than in the center.

As a result, some of the sloping streets were covered in rushing water, with deep puddles collecting at the bottom. Driving through these puddles in Sunny's old car would have been a problem, but he knew the complicated labyrinth of streets like his own five fingers, avoiding the worst of it with ease.

That fact had not escaped Effie. She looked around with interest, then asked:

"Where are we going, anyway?"

He shrugged.

"Where else? We are going to the Black Snake lair."

She seemed more amused than frightened by the prospect. Usually, a woman as attractive as her would have been wise to avoid entering a vicious gang's territory… but then again, this bombshell in particular seemed better suited to cracking skulls than most thugs were, so maybe they were the ones who had to be nervous.

"Just like that? Wait, how do you even… ah, right. You worked in the Organized Crime Division before, right?"

Sunny gave her a sideways glance.

"Yes. Something like that."

He lingered for a few moments, then sighed and said:

"Gangs were all over the city not too long ago — even ten years ago, they controlled these parts of Mirage City entirely. A single day rarely passed without someone ending up dead, not to mention all the vile crap going on in the shadows. The cops were either on the payroll or too afraid to do anything, and those who did try tended to be disposed of swiftly."

Sunny smiled crookedly, remembering his youth.

"Times change, though. The political climate shifted, and being tough on crime became a rallying cry for the ruling party. So, the Police Department was cleansed… mind you, it wasn't cleansed of corruption. The corrupt bastards being paid by the criminals were just swapped out for corrupt bastards being paid by the politicians. Well, and a few capable people managed to get themselves into key positions in all the chaos."

He fell silent for a while.

"Captain Jet was one of them — although she wasn't a captain back then, just yet. Actually... I only ended up becoming a cop because of her. Then, somehow, we ended up being partners in the Organized Crime Division, with her spearheading the crackdown on the gangs. Those were… intense years, to say the least."

Effie chuckled.

"Captain Jet, huh? Wait, where is she now?"

Sunny did not answer for a while, his knuckles turning white on the wheel.

Eventually, he said in an even tone:

"She's dead."

That was one of the reasons for his sorry state.

The main reason, really.

...And here he was, side by side with a new partner.

Sunny looked at the rookie detective somberly.

'I'm not responsible for her.'

Putting this woman in front of the cameras might be a great PR move for the Mirage PD… but it also painted a target on her back. She had to know it, but she was still here — so, it was her own decision.

He had nothing to do with it.

Turning back to the road, he said:

"Well, anyway. Most of the gangs were demolished back then, and those that remain are merely shadows of their former selves. They know their place, doing a bit of dirty business that everyone takes part in, but pretends that it's the most abhorrent thing in the world publicly. Others went clean and are now managing slimy, but perfectly legal, businesses. The Black Snakes, though…"

He frowned.

"The Black Snake is the only gang that is still somewhat of a real deal. So, when we get there…"

Effie grinned.

"Oh! Let's do the good cop, bad cop routine! I always wanted to! Can I be the bad cop? Please?"

Sunny gave her a dubious look.

Had she really graduated from the Academy at the top of her class?

Well… he could easily imagine all the examiners being too distracted drooling at the sight of this particular cadet to give her objective marks…

He pursed his lips and shrugged.

"Sure. You can be the bad cop."

The car came to a halt in front of a seedy building. It was not what one would imagine when thinking about a gang's headquarters, though — the lair of the Black Snakes was not a bar, a night club, or an illegal casino. Instead, it was an old, seemingly rundown boxing gym.

Climbing out of the car, Sunny waded through the rain and approached the front door. There was a muscular man in a training suit hiding under the canopy there, smoking somberly.

When he saw Sunny, the man's eyes widened a little. He stood there frozen for a moment, then silently threw away his cigarette and disappeared inside.

Sunny picked up the cigarette, tossed it into the nearby trash bin, and followed. His rookie partner was on his heels, looking around curiously.

'She's way too relaxed.'

The woman was either too confident in herself or had a screw loose.

Entering the boxing gym, they saw a scattering of rough-looking men. Some were busy abusing punching bags, some were playing cards at a plastic table, some were watching two muscular thugs having a spar in the ring.

…Some were already moving behind Sunny and Effie, locking the door.

He frowned slightly when he heard the sound of the bolt locking into place.

One of the men at the table looked back, then smiled and rose from his seat. The guard was standing nearby, having already reported something to him.

The man walked over to stand in front of Sunny and Effie. He stared at the former coldly, then shifted his gaze and leered at the latter.

"Hey there, sweetie…"

Effie smiled, too, then suddenly put on a fierce expression and bellowed:

"Listen up, assholes! We're from Mirage City PD. I am Detective Wow, and this is my partner, Detective Meh. We are going to ask you some questions, and if you bastards do not spill your guts… well, then, do not blame us for spilling them for you!"

The crowd of thugs was completely surrounding them by then, glaring at the two cops with an unrestrained hostility.

The man standing right in front of them remained silent for a few moments, then looked back at Sunny and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey to you, too… rat. I must say, you have some nerve showing up here, rat. And you brought your girlfriend, too… what's up with her, anyway?"

Sunny stared at him silently for a moment or two, then shrugged.

"She's playing the bad cop, you see."

The man laughed.

"Oh? Really? Wait, are you the good cop then, rat?"

Sunny lingered a little, then slowly shook his head.

"No…"

With that, he calmly delivered a vicious punch to the thug's face, sending the man crashing to the ground with a torrent of blood spilling from his broken nose.

Sunny looked at the surrounding thugs coldly.

"...I'm the worse cop."

Chapter-2459: Gang Violence

"What are you waiting for?! Kill these bastards!"

That was what the senior thug had wanted to say… however, since he was choking on blood and clutching his face with both hands, what actually came out of his mouth was a jumbled, angry howl.

Sunny was already turning to face the other Black Snakes, while his partner was still frozen in shock. Her eyes were opened wide, and there was a stunned expression on her face.

"H—hey! That was not very… detective-like…"

She did not have time to say anything else, because by then, the thugs finally realized what had happened and lunged at them.

'Tsk, tsk… things have really gone to shit after I left.'

Sunny knew some of these men, even if he had not seen them in a long, long while. Most were strangers... however, he only needed one look to determine that the Black Snake gang was not what it used to be.

There was no real viciousness in these men, no chilling readiness — desire, even — to take lives or lose their own. They were no killers. The Black Snakes had grown soft and fat on the money they were making from their sordid business without competition, and on the handouts they received from the powers that be, who occasionally needed them to do the dirty work.

It made sense, really. Those of them who had been the real deal would not have bowed down to the new authority, and therefore, they were either dead or rotting in prison by now. Only the trash remained.

So, even though there were close to twenty thugs in the boxing gym, all of them bursting with muscle and well-trained…

Really, all Sunny had to do was take out the trash.

Instead of waiting for the crowd of Black Snakes to descend upon him, he dashed forward to meet them instead. His heart was cold, and his mind was clear. There was no point in getting worked up about this scuffle… it was simply a chore.

Sure, if these twenty men had been determined and really knew how to work together, he would have been overwhelmed in mere moments. But they were men of inferior quality — thugs, not fighters. That gave him the initiative to hurt the first few, and once the rest saw it, their resolve would be shaken.

Their fear and hesitation would become their undoing.

Sunny might have been a featherweight, but his fists were anything but light. He knew where to hit to inflict as much pain as possible, and how to deal as much damage as possible. He also had a lot of experience — too much, really — fighting with his life at stake.

His first strike connected with the solar plexus of the swiftest thug, sending shock through the larger man's nerves and forcing him to stagger. A split second later, a vicious uppercut sent the thug falling to the floor with a suffocated scream.

Diving under the slow and sloppy punch of the next bruiser, Sunny ruthlessly kneed him in the groin, then slammed his elbow on the back of the poor bastard's head.

The third was already upon him… and that one had to serve as a lesson for the rest.

Catching the man's arm, Sunny moved like a ghost to twist it, and then brought his palm down on the elbow joint.

A disgusting squelching crunch was drowned out by a piercing shriek of pain.

'Strange…'

Sunny knew himself well, and he knew that he was a fierce fighter. But this… this felt almost too easy, as if he had become many times more skilled and experienced without noticing. As if fighting two dozen thugs who were more than willing to break and maim him was no big deal — inconsequential and pitifully trifling, even.

Not in any way comparable to the great and dreadful battles he had fought in his nightmares.

Could one's combat skills improve in a dream?

Letting go of the screaming man's mangled arm, Sunny push-kicked him in the side of the head and looked at the rest of the thugs with a mad glint in his eyes.

'Three down, seventeen to… huh? Thirteen to go?'

In the time it took Sunny to bring down three thugs — which was no more than a few seconds — his oddball of a partner had not been wasting her time, either. Honestly, he had not known how the rookie would react, and did not really care… but what he did not expect was that she would act without any delay at all, joining the fight with the same relaxed attitude.

Effie simply grabbed two thugs by the sides of their heads and slammed them together, all but cracking their skulls, then delivered a picture-perfect roundhouse kick to a third one, folding the man in half and sending him flying back into his buddies. She finished it all up by simply slapping the fourth one to the ground.

Through all of it, she seemed calm and unruffled, amused even… no, she was definitely having fun.

'What… the hell kind of mom is she?'

Sunny was surprised, somewhat dismayed at the fact that the rookie had taken down one more thug than him… and a little disturbed.

That calmness, that judgment, that effortless skill was not something a green and inexperienced detective was supposed to possess. Effie had been an athlete before becoming a cop, and although she did spend some time as a patrol officer, that alone could not have made

her into a bloodied fighter.

These qualities were something people only developed after a lifetime of conflict and bloodshed.

Either Sunny did not know something about his easygoing partner and was thus underestimating her… or she was not who she seemed.

His paranoia suddenly rose like a tide, making his eyes narrow.

But he had no time to dwell on the strange and ominous incongruity between who Effie was supposed to be and who she really was. First, he needed to deal with the Black Snakes.

Seeing seven of their own go down in a matter of seconds, the thugs were getting serious. Before, they had been planning to beat the two cops to a pulp with their fists… probably do some other, way more vile things to them. But now, Sunny saw knives and steel pipes appearing in their hands.

He smiled darkly.

'Don't blame me for being ruthless, then.'

Chapter-2460: On the Count of Three

Some time later, the floor of the boxing gym was littered with groaning, weakly moving bodies. The air was heavy with the stench of blood.

Sunny studied his bruised knuckles for a moment, then pushed a finger through a long cut on the side of his jacket and let out an irritated sigh.

"Now I'm going to be wet from the damn rain. Great."

He took off the jacket, revealing his arms — and the scales of the black serpent coiling around them.

If Effie was surprised to see a gang tattoo on the skin of her partner — one much more grand and vast than the ones covering the groaning thugs, no less — she did not show it. Instead, she rummaged around the table where the Black Snakes had been playing cards with a focused expression. Ignoring the alcohol and the piles of money, she picked up a bag of potato chips and smiled in satisfaction.

Sending one into her mouth, she asked with curiosity:

"Not to be a stickler for the rules, but haven't we broken at least a dozen laws just now?"

Sunny gave her a long look, then scoffed.

"Who's going to report us? Them?"

The groaning thugs were a pitiful sight, and they were definitely not going to bring the attention of the cops to themselves — let alone let

the news that a couple of cops wiped the floor with them spread.

Shaking his head, Sunny walked over to the ring, leaned down, and dragged one of the Black Snakes from under it by the leg. This one was whom he had punched first — the leader of this sorry bunch.

The lower part of his face was painted with blood, and his broken nose was swollen, sticking at a wrong angle.

Nevertheless, he gave Sunny a hateful gaze.

"What... kind of a damn demon are you... you're dead, rat! When the bosses find out, you're going to die…"

Sunny gave him a cold look, then reached forward and unceremoniously set the man's broken nose. As soon as a sharp scream turned into a pained groan, he patted the thug on the shoulder.

"There, there. I set it for you. We can't have you growing even uglier than you are now, can we?"

The man shivered under his ruthless gaze, pressing himself into the side of the ring.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then smiled dangerously.

"And hey, buddy, I think you need to get your facts straight. I am not a rat… a rat would have gone behind the backs of the bosses to sell them out to the cops. I told them that I was leaving fair and square, looking them in the eye. It's not my fault they weren't inclined to agree, is it? By the way, that is why you have new bosses now. The old bosses didn't scare me, did you think these new losers would?"

Leaning down, he whispered into the man's ear:

"Tell them to come find me. Hell, tell them I am waiting. That'll make my day."

He straightened and looked at the shivering thug with a complete lack of emotion in his black eyes.

"But then again, you'll have to be alive to tell them anything. And whether you'll live through the next few minutes… is completely up to you."

Effie, who had wandered close, gave him a reproachful look and sighed.

"...I was supposed to be the bad cop, though!"

Sunny ignored her. Instead, he produced his cracked phone and showed the thug a photo of the Nihilist's latest victim.

"Recognize him?"

The man tried to reel back, but he had nowhere to go.

"Shit! What the… what the fuck is that?! Get that crap away from me, damn it!"

Sunny blinked a few times.

"What, have you not seen a corpse before?"

He chuckled, then put the phone back into his pocket and told the thug the dead kid's name.

"He's one of yours, isn't he? You see, my partner and I came here with sincere intentions, wanting to help you guys bring the murderer to justice. There was no need to be so inhospitable, really. But since things already turned out the way they did… I guess you'll just have to tell us everything we need to know anyway."

The thug glared at Sunny and hissed through gritted teeth:

"Do you think I'll tell you anything, rat?! Dream on!"

Without saying a word, Sunny punched him in the face, dislodging the man's nose again.

There was another desperate scream, and Effie winced, taking a step back to continue munching on her potato chips.

"If I were you, I'd just tell him everything he wants to know. There's a limit to what plastic surgery can achieve, after all. There has to be something left of your nose for them to restore it…"

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Did I not tell you to stop calling me rat, bastard? Look what you made me do. Let's try it again, shall we? The kid — tell us everything there is to know about him. When was the last time you saw him? What was his job? Which part of the city did you have him working? Who were his friends? And so on."

The thug had raised both hands to shield his face, looking at Sunny through the tears that had veiled his eyes because of the pain. He remained silent for a while, and then barked angrily:

"I don't know! I don't know, you asshole! Okay?! He's not one of ours!"

Sunny stared at him darkly.

"Hey, friend. Do I look easy to you? Do you think I can't recognize a Black Snake mark when I see it?"

The thug shook his head desperately.

"No, wait! I mean it! He… he used to be a junior member, up until a couple of years ago. But we haven't seen him since!"

Sunny frowned.

"Huh? Since when is the Black Snake gang in the habit of losing track of its junior members?"

The thug lowered his hands and glared at Sunny, then grimaced and spat a mouthful of blood on the floor.

"What the hell do you know, Devil? The gang… is not what it used to be. Times have changed, damn it! It used to be that there we could just scoop up useless kids from the streets — little shits like you fought for the right to join us. But now, recruiting them is hard, and keeping hold of them is even harder."

He grimaced.

"Especially after those bastards opened doors. A damn charitable organization… they house them, educate them, support them financially, and even give them proper jobs. We lost a bunch of junior members to those assholes — this guy was one of the kids who left the gang and became a squeaky clean member of society thanks to them."

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other.

"A charitable organization? What charitable organization?"

The thug cursed under his breath.

"Mirage City Center for Troubled Youths… it's a private charity run by the Valor Group. You think we can compete with a damn conglomerate?!"

Sunny stared at him for a while, and then smiled viciously.

This… this was what he needed.

This was the thread he would pull to unravel the case!

"Valor Group, huh?"

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Soon enough, they left the upturned boxing gym and returned to the car. Effie seemed thoughtful… or maybe she was just wondering where to get more food. At this point, Sunny could not be sure.

He lingered in front of the car, soaking in the rain. She waited for a while, then gave him a confused look.

"What, are you sad that we hit a dead end? This whole Black Snake lead turned out to be meaningless."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, I'm not sad. And it wasn't meaningless… in fact, it was quite a

fruitful visit."

Then, he turned to the tall beauty and looked at her somberly.

"Listen… partner. Things are going to get interesting from here. So, I need you to tell me something honestly."

She smiled innocently.

"What's that?"

Not sharing her laidback tone, Sunny asked bluntly:

"Who the hell are you? Oh, and think carefully before answering. You might end up dying heroically on your first day as a detective if you don't. Killed by the vicious gang members… it will be a real tragedy."

The threat in his tone was apparent. He was saying that he would kill her if she tried to lie.

Sunny would have loved for his threat to be a joke, but it wasn't. The Nihilist case was far more dangerous than even those terrified of the elusive serial killer suspected — that was because it involved people whom a mere cop like him could not dare to touch.

Those people would not hesitate to make a troublesome cop disappear… they could, for example, insert one of their operatives into the case and force the higher-ups of the Police Department to saddle Sunny with that operative as a partner — to keep an eye on him, and dispose of him if need be.

He was not sure that Effie was a double agent, but he knew that she was not who she appeared to be.

His supposed partner stared at him for a while, silent. There was a hint of a strange emotion in her eyes… unease? Uncertainty? Fear?

But a split second later, it was gone.

Effie laughed and reached to slap him on the shoulder with her usual easygoing smile.

Her hand remained there, holding him lightly.

"What are you on about, Sunny? Snap out of it."

Sunny tensed, preparing to strike…

And then, something strange happened.

He snapped out of it.

A shiver ran through his body, and he looked around with a startled expression.

A strange city. Pouring rain. Air that smelled neither like the sterile cleanliness of NQSC nor the poisonous miasma of the outskirts. Unfamiliar buildings; a weird PTV of archaic design.

Shifting his gaze to the boisterous huntress, Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Effie? What the hell?"

Chapter-2461: Brave Old World

Sunny swayed, struggling to stay on his feet.

'Ah! D—damnation!'

He was impossibly weak! He was terribly frail! He was beaten and battered, exhausted beyond imagination, and ready to collapse! His body was torturously slow and clumsy, and on top of that, he was limited to only being aware of what was in front of his eyes. The shadows did not respond to his senses, and without them, he felt blind like a bat.

It seemed impossible that anyone could exist in this pitifully powerless, woefully limited, and creepily dull state.

'Wait… isn't that… simply what being mundane felt like?'

Sunny blinked a few times in complete shock.

Right, he was not under some harrowing hex that maimed his body and soul. He was simply reduced to being mundane once again. In fact, he was far stronger, faster, and resilient than he had ever been as a mundane person — after all, he was currently in a somewhat ragged, but still trained and tempered body of a well-fed adult, not that of a malnourished teenager.

He was Detective Sunny of the Mirage City Police Department.

'What the actual…'

Before, his memories seemed like a dream, while the Devil Detective's personality felt like his true self. Now, the positions were reversed — Sunny was himself once again, while the memories of the jaded detective felt like a vague, distant dream.

The senses of his other incarnations were just as vague, as if reaching him through a vast mass of water… or maybe through the silver surface of a great mirror.

He was in a mundane body. He did not have his Aspect or his Attributes, no essence, no cores. His Domain was gone. He did not have his shades and Shadows, either… while his own shadow was not an invaluable helper anymore! It was just silent and unresponsive, following him like a dead thing.

Just a few moments before, this simplistic and inadequate state of existence seemed perfectly normal to him. But now, Sunny felt like he had been crippled — like all his limbs had been severed, and all his senses were dulled!

It felt terrible.

He grabbed Effie's hand desperately and used it as support to keep himself from falling. A low groan escaped from his lips, followed by a stifled curse.

"Curses..."

As Sunny was trying to come to terms with being mundane once again, a perplexed voice resounded above his head.

"Hey there, buddy… are you alright? Mr. Devil Detective?"

Looking up in dismay, Sunny grimaced and spat through gritted teeth:

"What damn Devil Detective?! No, I'm not alright! I am… mundane?!"

Effie stared at him in confusion for a couple of moments. Then, her eyes widened.

"Shadow Boy? Is that really you?! You remembered?!"

Sunny let go of Effie's hand and straightened, slowly regaining his composure.

"Stop calling me Shadow Boy, damn it! And… yes, it's me. I did

remember. How the hell…"

But before he could finish talking, Effie suddenly pressed her palm against his mouth, shutting him up. Surprise and confusion drained from her eyes, replaced by alarm. Looking around warily, she remained silent for a few moments, and then said:

"Not here. Not where someone can hear us. How about… we go find somewhere more private to talk?"

Sunny frowned, then gestured to the car. It was only then that Effie removed her hand and grinned.

"Well then, let's go, partner! Personally, I — a rookie homicide detective of Mirage PD — am starving. What about you?"

He wanted to retort, but couldn't… because now that he was mundane, he suddenly needed to eat food as sustenance again. So, actually, Sunny was quite hungry too.

'..What a chore.'

"Yeah. I can eat."

She studied him for a moment, then nodded and climbed into the car. Sunny did, as well, finding himself in the driver's seat. A completely unfamiliar control system met him, which he somehow knew how to operate. After spending a few seconds studying the weird PTV's dashboard, Sunny inserted the key into the ignition with a dubious expression, then gave it a tentative turn.

The PTV roared with a level of noise that could only be called obnoxious, vibrated like a trembling animal dying from fear in front of a predator, and spat a thick stream of noxious gas from its back.

Sunny blinked a few times, aghast at the barbarity of this primitive machine, and looked at Effie.

He had already surmised that the strange world they had found themselves in resembled the waking world before the Dark Times, but this… this was an entirely new level of absurdity.

"...Did people really drive these horrid things?"

Effie arched an eyebrow.

"How would I know?"

Sunny put his hands on the wheel and sighed.

"Fair."

He spent a few moments allowing the muscle memory of the Devil Detective to take over, and a few more convincing himself to trust it. Then, he drove off, painfully aware that since he was somehow a mundane human again, driving the archaic PTV into a street lamp may very well result in his death.

It was really quite offensive. Him, the Sovereign of Death? Being killed by a street lamp?

Who the hell would actually go and die from something as frivolous as a high-speed collision?

Luckily, he did not hit anything immediately, and after a minute or two, controlling the loud, stench-producing machine started to feel natural to him. He even got used to the weird vibrations until they blended into the background.

"Where are we going?"

Effie shrugged.

"Try to dig in the fake you's memory, find a rundown and desolate diner he used to frequent. Considering that grumpy malcontent's character, there should be at least one."

Sunny tried not to think about how weird the advice was and did just that. He tried to reach into the Devil Detective's memory, and after a while, a location did magically come to his mind, complete with the knowledge on how to get there.

'...How convenient.'

It was very strange.

He narrowed his eyes and sent the PTV rolling in the right direction.

Before too long, though, it let out a series of strange noises and abruptly grew quiet, seemingly losing power. Sunny barely managed to park it at the side of the road before the vehicle completely lost momentum.

Both he and Effie were startled and confused.

"Huh? What… what is wrong with it?"

Sunny stared at the unfamiliar dashboard, then turned the key this way and that. The PTV let out a few suffocating sniffles, but did not start again.

The two of them looked at each other. After a while, Effie offered a suggestion in an uncertain tone:

"Is it… out of power? Do we need to charge it?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"I'm not sure. Maybe? How do we charge this thing, though?"

He thought for a bit, then said hesitantly:

"I think it's more like a military PTV than a normal one? I mean, it can self-charge if you deposit a fuel cell into it."

Effie coughed.

"I, uh… I think they use liquid fuel? Some kind of petroleum derivative. That stuff was still abundant before the Dark Times."

Sunny stared at her with wide eyes.

"Are you crazy? What kind of idiot would fuel their vehicle with a flammable substance?"

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"Oh, this vehicle is using an internal combustion engine. Basically, it moves by harnessing the power of countless tiny explosions. We learned about them in history class… that's why that thing over there is called the ignition!"

Sunny laughed.

"Yeah, right."

Millions of people riding around on streams of tiny explosions… Effie's jokes were really too much.

Noticing that she was looking at him earnestly, though, Sunny slowly lost the smile.

"Wait, you're being serious?"

He looked down, at the place where the PTV's engine was hidden, with a hint of horror in his eyes.

After a while, Sunny inhaled deeply and shook his head.

"No wonder these people blew up half of the world…"

Chapter-2462: Before the Dark Times

It took Sunny some time to remember that the Devil Detective had kept a canister of fuel in the trunk of the archaic PTV. Then, it took him some more time to figure out how to deposit the appallingly pungent liquid into the vehicle, all the while being soaked in rain and cursing under his breath.

Being in the rain actually made him uncomfortably cold. Sunny had almost forgotten the feeling of being powerless in the face of the elements, so it was somewhat of a novel experience for him. Needless to say, he climbed back into the PTV in a foul mood.

Looking at Effie with a deep scowl, he suppressed a heavy sigh and asked:

"Is your mundane alter ego also a sleep-deprived, rage-fueled wreck craving nothing more than an unhealthy dose of nicotine and alcohol?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"Nope. I am basically a shining example of how regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle are good for you. I mean, sure, becoming mundane all of a sudden was a bit disorienting… but actually, I am enjoying myself."

Brimming with vitality, Effie gestured to her toned, tantalizing body.

"It's interesting. I was never both able-bodied and mundane — so, this is a new experience for me."

Sunny's stare turned bitter.

"I see."

Looking away, he started the car and sent it rolling forward again.

As they drove to their destination, he could appreciate the vistas of Mirage City from a new perspective. Sunny knew, of course, what cities before the Dark Times looked like — but only from archival footage, webtoon illustrations, and movie sets. Seeing it all with his own two eyes, and in great detail, was completely different.

He couldn't help but feel put off by how different everything looked. There were no barriers surrounding the city, no alloy towers, no isolation domes around active Nightmare Gates peppered here and there. The air was naturally breathable, and the citizens did not seem afraid of the rain, as if there was no possibility of it turning to acid.

The architecture was entirely foreign to what he was used to, and the buildings themselves were many times lower than they were in NQSC — despite the fact that they were built exclusively up, with almost no subterranean levels. There were no layers to the city, just one flat surface with hills and small mountains rising here and there.

Everything seemed so… simple and relaxed, even if it had felt overwhelming and permeated by crushing tension to the Devil Detective.

"How large do you think this city is?"

Effie contemplated for a moment.

"Uh… I think it has a population of around ten million? Twenty-something millions, including the greater metropolitan area."

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

"Twenty million people? That's… that's tiny!"

From the impression he had gotten from the vague memories of the Devil Detective, Mirage City was a sprawling metropolis suffocating in a flood of human sins. However, ten million — even twenty or thirty — was positively a tiny amount. There had been many times more people living just in the outskirts of NQSC, let alone in the city

itself, with its population in the hundreds of millions.

Mirage City… was a village!

And despite that, it somehow managed to look crowded. Maybe because everyone had somehow gotten a PTV license instead of using public transport like normal people did… as a result, not only was the air full of noxious fumes and noise, but the traffic also prevented anyone from getting anywhere in a timely fashion.

People were simply stuck on the road, their vehicles crawling at such a low speed that even the pedestrians could outpace them. Nevertheless, the pedestrians — actual people — were reduced to a subservient species in their own city, fearfully clinging to the sides of the streets to make way for the actual dominant creatures, the PTVs.

And those weren't even cargo PTVs, either — almost all of them were for personal use.

It didn't make any sense!

'Does no one here notice how absurd the situation is? What is the city management doing?'

No… actually, if he remembered correctly, countless people did use a public transport network here — mostly the underground trains. It was just that the network was similarly inadequate and failed to serve even such a tiny population, resulting in overcrowding and unbearably bleak peak traffic hours.

Well, that last part actually made sense. With the primitive technology of the days before the Dark Times and no spelltech, digging underground tunnels must have been a real chore. However, the very reason why they had to be dug underground in the first place was that the surface roads were usurped by personal vehicles.

'Underground tunnels, huh…'

Somewhere far away, one of Sunny's incarnations looked up with a glint in his eyes. Bastion was only starting to develop its own public transport networks, and there was no modern technology or spelltech in the Dream Realm either.

However, there was Sunny.

And Sunny had the shade of Abundance at his disposal.

How long would it take the Sacred worm to create a vast network of tunnels under Bastion, to serve as the foundation of a future metro system?

Not long at all…

'Should I discuss it with Cassie? We'll need some engineers, sure — well, a lot of them — but as long as they remain unaware of how the tunnels will be created and who will create them, it can work splendidly…'

Sunny was distracted for a while, and by the time he came back to his senses, they were already near the ramshackle diner the Devil Detective used to frequent.

If he was generous, the place could be called quaint and unassuming. If he wasn't, though, he'd call it a trash heap masquerading as an establishment where people were supposed to eat.

The diner was small, shabby, and exceedingly sparse in decor. There was no decor to be mentioned, really, just a few cheap tables with similarly cheap chairs. It was mostly used by blue-collar workers, so there were only guests here during the lunch hours and in the evening, when people got off work.

At the moment, the place was completely empty, with the exception of a grumpy waitress who disappeared somewhere immediately after delivering their order.

…The food, however, was miraculous.

"Oh gods."

Sunny stared at Effie with wide eyes. Effie was similarly looking at him with an enraptured expression.

There was unlimited clean drinking water. Every dish was made entirely from natural ingredients, with not a single synthetic morsel

in sight. The flavors were rich, the side dishes were fresh — and could be refilled endlessly! — and the portions were exceedingly generous. Despite all that, the meal was dirt cheap.

'How is this possible?'

Very few people in NQSC could afford to eat like this, and even those who could would have to pay a crazy amount of credits for such an amazing meal. The situation was a little better in the Dream Realm, but even there, most food was still synthetic and being imported from the waking world.

'Am I... in heaven?'

For a while, Sunny was uncomfortably similar to Effie, practically inhaling the delicious food with little to no table manners and ordering more and more of it.

After a while, extremely satiated and feeling sleepy from all the food, he looked at her groggily and asked:

"By the way, why did you insist that we should talk in a private place?"

Effie leaned back, eased her waistband, and patted her flat belly with a deeply satisfied grin.

"Oh, it's nothing major. Just that... we'll probably die horribly if the locals notice us breaking character…"

Chapter-2463: The Lives of Others

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then threw a brief glance at the door behind which the waitress had disappeared. No one else was in the deserted diner, and the pedestrians rushing past the dirty window could not hear them.

He raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

Effie let out a long sigh and poured herself a cup of water before speaking again. Eventually, she leaned back and said in a low tone:

"Well… I don't know how you came about, but I was home — the home of the newly promoted Detective Athena of Mirage PD, that is. A married woman with a loving husband and an adorable kid… a couple of adorable kids, actually, a boy and a girl. Needless to say, those were not my kids and not my husband. So, when he went for a kiss, I was understandably not having it."

Sunny frowned.

"Wait. You were aware of who you really are from the start?"

Effie nodded.

"Yes. We entered the Hall of Imagination… then, my memory is a bit hazy. The next thing I knew, I was standing in a living room, folding laundry. I was alone, mundane, and completely turned around. Before I could really figure out what had happened, I was assaulted by two overly enthusiastic kids who wanted to play cops and robbers with mommy."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"What the hell is cops and robbers?"

Effie scoffed.

"It's a local version of Awakened and Abominations, naturally. Anyway, yes, I was never under the illusion that I was the real Detective Athena. The kids were sweet and adorable, so even though I was weirded out of my mind, I went along with what was happening and tried to slowly regain my bearings while playing with them. That was how I figured out the basic facts about this place and learned to rummage in my counterpart's memories. So, everything went well… until her husband showed up."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"What? Did you smack him when he went for a smooch?"

Effie let out a joyless chuckle.

"No… maybe I would have, but my instincts are still those of a Saint. You know how it is — we need to be careful around mundane people, so the thought of striking him never even crossed my mind. I just dodged away and let him know in no uncertain terms that there would be no smooching, kissing, squeezing, fondling, or canoodling of any kind."

Sunny gave her an exasperated look.

"I don't need the details, you know?"

She grinned.

"Why, not a fan of canoodling? That is not what Neph…"

Sunny scoffed.

"Hey, lady. I am not a fan… I am the artist."

Effie stared at him silently for a few long moments, then threw her head back and exploded with laughter.

"Oh… oh, gods! Did… did you really just say that?"

Sunny raised his chin defiantly and suppressed a smile.

"I did. Not only did I say it, but I also meant every word."

She continued to laugh for a while longer, then wiped the tears off the corners of her eyes and looked at him with a wry smile.

"You know, Shadow Boy… you are actually not that scary up close, are you?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Not unless you are scared of innocuous stuff like dark demigods who command legions of dead souls and can damn you to eternal servitude, with not even death offering escape… I guess."

Effie grinned.

"Right."

She studied him for a bit, then sighed.

"Well, in any case. The moment I refused the affections of that man — the moment I broke character — something very creepy happened."

He frowned.

"What?"

Effie gulped down her water and looked into the distance with a somber expression.

"He… changed. Even creepier, though, was the fact that the kids changed, too. It was not that they turned into some hideous abominations or displayed dreadful powers, they just… sort of froze, turned to look at me in eerie synchronicity, and stared. They still looked human, but there was nothing human about them at that moment. I don't know how to describe it, but there was something deeply wrong deep in their eyes. Something empty and utterly alien

to what a human, or even an abomination, should be."

Sunny's frown deepened.

"Sounds… familiar."

Effie nodded curtly.

"Yes. It was, indeed, familiar. In fact, I've seen eyes like those before."

She looked into the window, at the torrent of passersby rushing along under a river of umbrellas.

"I saw it during the war, in Bastion. When one of the Others pretended to be Aether."

Sunny's eyes narrowed, and a shiver ran down his spine.

"You mean…"

Effie looked at him darkly.

"Yes. My supposed husband, the adorable kids, the cops on the crime scene, the Black Snakes, the waitress who served us food… and the rest of those twenty million so-called people living in Mirage City... are all Others."

Sunny froze, suddenly paralyzed by fear.

It was not often that he felt fear these days…

But the thought of twenty million Others surrounding him from all sides more than deserved the honor of frightening him.

In fact, if Sunny's ability to feel frightened had not deteriorated awfully after more than a decade of suffering all kinds of horrors, he would have been utterly terrified right now.

Turning his head slowly, Sunny looked at the constant stream of pedestrians outside the window, the flood of noisy PTVs behind them, and the crowded forest of tall buildings stretching beyond the horizon.

Suddenly… Mirage City did not seem so tiny anymore.

It seemed like a boundless abyss containing unfathomable depths of terror instead.

Effie grimaced.

"Look. You are a Supreme who has become a powerless mundane human. While they… they are the Others who were made into powerless mundane humans. And as long as everyone plays their roles faithfully, they are bound by these roles, unable to be anything but what their characters are supposed to be. Luckily, I resumed acting like Detective Effie in time, and my creepy family returned to being normal as if nothing had happened."

She smiled.

"So, you can understand why I had to be careful when we first met. I was happy to see you, but also, I wasn't sure that you were… you. I kept thinking — is this the real Lord of Shadows, or is this an Other who just happens to look like the Lord of Shadows? I couldn't just ask, since that would mean breaking character… so I decided to play along and see how things go."

Inhaling slowly, Sunny looked back at Effie, lingered for a few moments, and asked in an even tone:

"Are you sure that everyone here is an Other?"

She shrugged.

"Reasonably sure. Naturally, nobody really knows that much about the Others. However…"

Effie sighed and poured herself more water.

"It would make sense, wouldn't it? Clan Valor had always been wary of the Others — that was because the Others sometimes escaped from the Great Mirror. They came from the other side of reflections… from True Bastion. But how did they come to be there, and where do they come from? Well, if the Great Mirror in False Bastion is really no more than a reflection of the true Great Mirror, then what if that is

where they dwell? They are trapped inside the true Great Mirror, and now, we are too."

Sunny inhaled slowly.

"Yes, that… does make sense, I guess."

Effie chewed her lip, then said quietly:

"It's that damn Demon of Imagination — Mirage, or whatever her name was. She created Rivergate, Bastion… and the Great Mirror. She must have put the Others into the hidden realm inside the Great Mirror, as well. Hell, she might have created the eerie creeps, for all we know."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"But why would an illusory realm created by the Demon of Imagination resemble an Earth city from before the Dark Times?"

Effie looked around and smiled faintly.

"That is the question, isn't it?"

Chapter-2464: Palace of Imagination

Sunny remained silent for a while, contemplating, then said slowly:

"Unless… Mirage wasn't the one who created this city at all."

Effie gave him a dubious look.

"If not the great and terrible Demon of Imagination, then who? This place is literally called Mirage City, for Spell's sake."

Sunny shook his head.

"Think about it. Mirage might have created Bastion — both its true and illusory versions — but that is not all Bastion is. It has been taken by the Spell and turned into a Citadel… a Great Citadel, no less. So, just like with other Citadels, the Spell would have taken what made this place special and given its master a way to use it. Turning it into a Component."

Effie wrinkled her nose.

"I don't follow. Are you saying that I, the current master of Bastion, created Mirage City?"

Sunny shook his head again.

"No, I don't think that it was you. I think that someone has co-opted that Component of Bastion and created Mirage City in your stead."

He hesitated for a few moments, then added:

"Naturally, we don't know a lot about the Demon of Imagination. However, we know that her powers had to do with fantasies, illusions, and fanciful things — like fairytale castles rising from the

clouds reflected on the surface of water. And that her hobbies included creating lakes and tinkering with mirrors."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"So, what would be hidden in the heart of her cloud castle? A terrible weapon? A prison for eerie beings from the reflections? No. I think that this place — this harrowing city imprisoning millions of Others… is a playground."

Effie laughed.

"Wait, a playground? First a toy room, now a playground... is this your weird way of making up for a dull childhood?"

Sunny scoffed.

"I wish. No… but I do think that this place, the Palace of Imagination, is created to be a playground of sorts. A realm where anything Mirage imagined would become reality — just like the illusory Bastion, only devoid of permanence, capable of changing according to her every whim. Complete with beings to populate that reality and play whatever roles she wanted them to. After all, the only thing the Demon of Imagination could not create was living beings — that was something only the gods could do. Well, and Nether."

Effie leaned back and frowned.

"But… the Demon of Imagination is gone, and this playground of hers was turned into a Component of Bastion by the Nightmare Spell, thus allowing Awakened to control it."

Sunny nodded.

"Only the original masters of Bastion — Warden and Anvil — never discovered the Mirror Maze, and never made it to the Palace of Imagination. Instead, someone else slipped his way here, and made this place his."

Effie's frown deepened.

"...Mordret."

Her tone was not at all enthused. In fact, Sunny had rarely heard his easygoing friend sound so somber.

He was not too happy, either.

"It was either him or Morgan. Had to be. I don't know whether they created this city consciously or if the Great Mirror simply extracted the blueprint from their subconscious, but it was definitely one of them."

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"Right. Morgan is also here, but we have no idea where either of them is…"

Sunny smirked.

"Says who? Actually, I have already located both Morgan and Mordret. Oh, I also found Saint while I was at it."

Effie blinked a few times.

"When did you… actually, never mind. Wow, Shadow Boy! You really do work fast. So fast, in fact, that it makes me wonder if you're as quick in…"

Sunny gave her chair a kick under the table, winced at the pain in his mundane foot, and said:

"Mordret is the young CEO of the Valor Group… which is a private conglomerate that basically controls the city. The politicians, the courts, the police — pretty much everyone is in their pocket, so he is all but untouchable."

Effie raised her eyebrows.

"What? How is that even possible? I mean… a private company having more power than the government, let alone the people? That sounds completely implausible, does it not?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Sure, sounds far-fetched. But we are in an imaginary realm, remember? It's only reasonable that some things here will be entirely fantastical, not at all based in reality."

He wasn't sure how things worked before the Dark Times, but a society completely ruled by money and private interest seemed like too irrational a concept to have existed — human greed was boundless, after all, so who in their right mind would base a world order around that?

Imagining what would happen to the world if Aiko was in charge, Sunny was suddenly covered in cold sweat.

'By the dead gods. Let's hope that she never becomes a Sovereign…'

He smiled weakly and shook his head.

"Well, think about the Great Clans. Could the government, let alone the people, have done anything against them? No. In that sense, the Valor Group is not that different from the Great Clan Valor."

Sunny sighed.

"Saint has become a hotshot psychiatrist in an elite, high-security mental hospital. While Morgan… Morgan is a patient in that hospital."

Effie looked at him in surprise.

"What? Morgan is in a crazy house?"

He nodded.

"Yes. I saw her myself… actually, she told me to find you. It was just that I had no idea who you were when she did."

Effie frowned.

"Morgan knew who she was, too? That makes two of us who weren't brainwashed by this place, and one of you who was. What makes you different? No, wait… why did she tell you to find me? How did she even know that I am here with you?"

Sunny remained silent for a little while, then shook his head.

"I don't know why you two weren't affected by Mirage City. As for the rest… I don't think Morgan knew that you were here. She told me to find you for a reason, though. Think about it… how did I regain my senses?"

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"Well. We roughed those thugs up, then you just sort of did? After I told you to snap out of it."

Sunny nodded again.

"Indeed. You touched me and told me to snap out of it. And I did. I don't think it was a coincidence, either — rather, I think that you have some authority here as the master of Bastion. That was why Morgan told me to find you."

That was indeed the most logical conclusion. Sunny would have loved to believe that he regained his senses thanks to the power of friendship — after all, Kai had managed to return him from the mire of Shadow Dance by reminding him of those he cared about — but he knew that something more was at play here.

This place, Mirage City, was no mere illusion. It was fantasy made reality, fueled by the fantastical power of the Demon of Imagination. It was no less real than any other place in the Dream Realm, and what Sunny had escaped from was not merely a delusion — it was the sorcery of a daemon.

No matter how highly he thought of himself, he knew he was not powerful enough to overcome the will of Mirage, the Demon of Imagination. Instead, he had regained his sense of self through a mechanism built by her into the Great Mirror.

Effie grinned.

"Oh! It's nice to know that I have some authority here… not that I feel very authoritative. I don't think that I can control this place freely — nothing I tried really worked until now. It's as if something is blocking my way."

Sunny looked at her darkly.

"Well, naturally. After all, someone has stolen your… let's call it administrator rights."

She pursed her lips, pouting, then gave Sunny an inquisitive look.

"Darn thieves! What do we do, then?"

He shrugged.

"Isn't it obvious? Find the bastard, get your control of the Component back, find what I am looking for, and get the hell out of here."

Sunny thought for a bit, and then added in a morose tone:

"Of course, it won't be very easy. Because we must achieve all that… while playing the roles of a jaded detective who doesn't play by the rules and his perky young partner flawlessly…"

Chapter-2465: Buried Evidence

Effie changed her posture and leaned forward a little. Then, she smiled languidly while looking at Sunny.

"Perky young partner, huh? Well, I sure am perky… thanks for noticing, I guess… but young? I think you're younger than me?"

Sunny let out a heavy sigh and suppressed the desire to palm his face.

He stared the grinning woman in the eye and answered in a slightly disgruntled tone:

"Age is a relative thing. I might have been born a couple of years later than you, but have I lived less than you? At this point, even I am not sure. Among other things, I am living seven lives at the same time… does that mean that I am aging seven times faster? Who knows — I definitely don't. Point is, the Devil Detective is your counterpart's senior. So, treat me accordingly."

Effie's grin widened a little, and her eyes glistened.

"Alright, Big Brother!"

Sunny shuddered.

"No, no! None of that, never!"

She batted her eyelashes innocently, then leaned back and shrugged.

"Well, whatever. In any case, what is our next step?"

Sunny contemplated her question for a while. Eventually, he frowned.

"Our target is Mordret, the CEO of the Valor Group. Besides him, there are two secondary persons of interest — Saint and Morgan.

Saint does not seem to remember herself, acting out the role assigned to her by the Great Mirror…"

That of his inordinately gorgeous therapist. Who talked!

Sunny remembered the bizarre experience of seeing — and hearing — the human version of Saint. Now that he had regained his sense of self, he did not know how to feel about that. It was fascinating, a little thrilling… but mostly, it felt completely and utterly wrong.

He cleared his throat, then continued:

"You… must not know a lot about Saint, but she can become an extremely valuable ally to us — as long as we manage to remind her of who she is. More importantly, she can help us gain access to Morgan."

His expression darkened.

"Saint is valuable, but Morgan… Morgan is priceless. What we lack the most at the moment is information, and she seems to know a lot about what is going on — much more than we do, at least. However, getting to her won't be easy. That asylum is like an impenetrable fortress, built to prevent anyone from both getting in and getting out."

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then added somberly:

"As for Mordret… well, he is probably the most well-guarded person in Mirage City. We don't know whether he remembers himself or not — all we know is that he is somehow connected to the Nihilist case."

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Wait… before, the Devil Detective mentioned that he knew who the Nihilist was, and that he only needed concrete evidence to prove it. Don't tell me that he meant the most powerful person in the city?"

When Sunny remained silent, Effie's eyes widened.

"The young CEO of the Valor Group — Mordret, that creep — goes around gruesomely murdering people at night?"

Sunny sighed.

"The Devil Detective was sure that it was Mordret… but I am not. He had a reason to hate that guy, though."

Frowning, Sunny tried to parse through the vague, dreamlike memories of his counterpart. There were facts, there were emotions, there were thoughts and suspicions, all painted in dark hues by hatred, obsession, and insomnia.

After a while, he explained:

"Everyone thinks that the Nihilist has never left any clues behind, but actually, that is not true. There was a piece of evidence at the first crime scene — a blood sample that did not belong to the victim. That DNA test revealed that it belonged to none other than the heir of Valor Group, Mordret."

Effie arched her eyebrows.

"What? There was evidence connecting him to the crime scene? Why is he still walking free, then?"

Sunny smiled bitterly.

"Because he had an ironclad alibi. There was video evidence proving that Mordret was on the other side of the city when the murder took place — so, the higher-ups chose to suppress the investigation. The blood sample was destroyed, and everyone who had come in contact with it was threatened into silence."

He shook his head.

"The Devil Detective was the person in charge of the case, though, and he refused to let go. He believed that the video recording had been doctored, so the investigation into the Valor Group and its CEO continued with the Homicide Division Captain's silent approval."

Effie looked at him in confusion.

"What happened next?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said in an even tone:

"The Captain got into an unfortunate accident and passed away. My counterpart was convinced that she was killed because of the investigation and tried to accost Mordret, getting into an altercation with his security team. Needless to say, that was an unwise decision. The Nihilist had become a public menace by then, though, so they could not simply get rid of me. Instead, I was sent to a court-mandated psychological counseling and suspended pending a psychiatric evaluation."

He sighed.

"And here we are."

Effie considered his words for a while, then smiled faintly.

"So that is why you were so excited when those thugs pointed at the Valor Group. The identity of the latest victim gives us an excuse to dig into Mordret again."

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. They can bury a blood sample, but — ironically enough — they can't bury a corpse. Now that a person directly tied to Valor was killed by the Nihilist, we can openly investigate them — and nobody will be able to pressure us into giving up that lead without risking an avalanche of public outrage."

Effie smiled.

"So… the first thing we need to do is figure out how exactly that Black Snake kid was connected to the Valor Group, right? That will give us an official reason to approach Mordret. And once we approach Mordret…"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"We'll play it by ear. Oh, by the way, Morgan told me something else back when I saw her…"

His smile turned cold all of a sudden.

"She told me that Mordret can actually be killed here."

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"You're not planning to just assassinate him in broad daylight, are you?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shook his head with sigh of regret.

"No... that would probably be out of character for the Devil Detective."

He looked at Effie and smiled.

"It does sound tempting, though..."

Chapter-2466: Changing the World

The Mirage City Center for Troubled Youths — a charitable organization set up by the Valor Group to help delinquent youths find their place in society — was situated some distance away from the ramshackle diner.

Sunny remembered how to properly fuel the Devil Detective's archaic PTV and stopped at a gas station, then checked his mental map of Mirage City and hesitantly plotted the course.

As they drove, the quaint vistas of the ancient city slowly ceased to look so odd. He was getting used to the strange architecture, the abundance of noisy PTVs, the lack of quarantine zones, and the flat nature of it all.

The people were the strangest, though, even if it took him a while to realize what that strangeness was…

It was the lack of fear.

The people of Mirage City all had their worries, of course, but their eyes lacked the subtle alertness that all humans of the waking world shared. A Nightmare Gate could open in front of them at any moment, after all; a Sleeper who had slipped through the cracks could turn into a Nightmare Creature and go on a rampage.

The humans of the waking world had grown accustomed to the constant threat of a sudden, senseless death and did not allow it to interfere with their lives. But that fear still left a mark on them.

Here in Mirage City, though, there was no such threat. People were not immortal, but all the dangers they faced were mundane — they did not suffer the existential dread that the inhabitants of reality did,

and were not ruled by a great and sinister power they were powerless against… the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny wondered what it would have felt like, to live in a world that was free of the tyranny of Nightmares. To live without fear…

'They would probably invent fears of their own, and live in a prison built of those.'

Effie looked at him for a while, then asked in a lazy tone.

"Hey, partner. I've been thinking…'

Sunny suppressed a groan.

That didn't bode well.

"About what?"

Effie lingered for a moment, then shrugged with a grin.

"It's just that, wasn't this adventure supposed to prepare me for becoming a Sovereign? But instead, I ended up becoming mundane — three whole Ranks further away from Supremacy than I used to be. How come Kai gets to battle harrowing fallen deities, but I am stuck fistfighting third-rate thugs while dodging the advances of an Other who thinks that he's my husband? That's just… not fair!"

Sunny gave her a sidelong glance.

"This adventure is indeed meant to help prepare you for the Fourth Nightmare. But Kai and you are different people. What you need to learn is different, too."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? And what is it that you think I must learn?"

He exhaled slowly.

"Well, about that… actually, I am not too sure. You are a deceptive person, but in a different way from me."

Effie stared at him in confusion for a while, then exploded with laughter.

"Me? A deceptive person? What are you talking about… I am an open book!"

Sunny scoffed.

"This is exactly what I am talking about. There are two of you, really — there is Effie… Raised By Wolves… a cheerful and easygoing woman who glides through life without taking anything too seriously. This is who everyone meets. But beneath it all, there is also Athena, Born From Being Eaten Alive, an astute and calloused person who had to fight desperately for each step she had taken in this world. This one, most people fail to see… but I know that she's there."

Effie studied him for a few moments, then whistled and looked away.

"Wow. You are hopeless, you know that?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"No, I don't. What are you talking about?"

She chuckled.

"I mean, you just can't imagine that an astute person can be cheerful and easygoing, can you? Listen, you morose killjoy… you're entirely wrong. There is only one of me — I am not hiding behind a false facade of cheerfulness, I just know how to enjoy life, even if it seems too bitter to swallow at times."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"Too bitter to swallow… it's all food metaphors with you, huh?"

He remained silent for a bit, then shrugged.

"Point is, Kai lacks confidence in himself. But you don't — on the contrary, you know exactly what you want, and you are not afraid to get it. In fact, I think that this is exactly the problem. You have

already gotten everything you wanted… you've built the kind of life for yourself that leaves you entirely satisfied. So, you are not desperate enough."

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"Me? Not desperate enough? I feel desperate way too often, partner. Every time I look at my husband and at my son, I feel desperate to protect them — because I know all too well what is coming for all of us."

Her voice had turned somber, losing its usual carefree tone for a short moment.

Sunny shook his head.

"That is the thing, though. A Sovereign is someone who can reshape the world to fit their will — so, all Supremes are born from a desperate wish to change the world. Otherwise, where would their determination to reshape it come from? But you… you don't want to change the world. Rather, you want to make sure that the world maintains its shape, because it already fits you. You are the only person I know who is truly satisfied with their life, and that… I am not sure if that is enough."

Sunny was suddenly reminded of a conversation he had had with Effie a long time ago. He had shared his desire to be stronger than Nephis, and Effie told him that he would never be stronger than Nephis unless he found conviction. That was one of the reasons he had undertaken a perilous journey to Antarctica, in the end…

What he was telling her now wasn't exactly the same, but he still couldn't help but feel that their roles were reversed.

Effie remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Is it such a sin, to be satisfied with one's life?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, it's not. In fact, if you know some secret way to achieve that… please teach me!"

Effie laughed, then looked at him with a grin.

"Ah… so you want me to teach you about satisfaction. Okay, listen well — it's time for another one of Auntie Effie's lessons…"

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Oh, no...'

He suddenly realized that he was trapped in a PTV with her, with nowhere to escape.

Chapter-2467: A Troublesome Discovery

The Center for Troubled Youths looked strangely tranquil and picturesque after the busy concrete jungle of the city. It was situated in a quiet neighborhood, taking up most of it — the grounds were surrounded by a neat fence, spacious enough to accommodate a modest park and a good collection of sports facilities, starting from a football field and ending with several tennis courts.

There were not a lot of the aforementioned troubled youths in sight, considering the pouring rain, but the buildings themselves looked clean and well-maintained. There was a main building where classes took place, two dormitories, a cafeteria hall, and so on… overall, the Youth Center looked like a campus of a prestigious, well-to-do university.

There was even a street musician on the corner, playing a peaceful tune on an old guitar while hiding under a large black umbrella.

Sunny and Effie looked at each other warily. After a while, he said:

"The more innocent it looks…"

Effie ended the sentence with a frown:

"The creepier it usually is."

Neither of them liked the idea of the Valor Group and Mordret collecting young delinquents in an unassuming private facility — supposedly to help them. Who knew what kind of shady things were going on here?

After hesitating for a while, Sunny sighed.

"You go talk to whoever is in charge here. I'll… look around."

They presented their badges to the security guard at the entrance and were admitted inside after some mild resistance. Effie headed for the main building to find the director of the Youth Center, while Sunny lingered at the gate for a while before leaving to explore the territory.

They met back at the car some time later, both wearing troubled expressions.

"What did you find?"

Sunny's voice was even.

Effie studied him for a bit, then said somberly.

"You first."

He sighed.

"Well… it… seems completely normal?"

Her expression cleared.

"Right? I found absolutely nothing to suggest that there's something shady going on in this place. The director is a very nice old lady… she told me everything I needed to know, and was genuinely upset to learn that the kid had been killed."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Right. I walked around the whole territory and even spoke to a few residents. Everything seems above board. The youths are content, well-cared for, and happy. There are no strange vibes, no creepy undertones… nothing suspicious at all. From everything I saw, it seems like a completely legitimate charitable organization that is both funded well and managed well, with everyone doing their hardest to make sure that these kids receive a bright future."

They stared at each other in utter confusion.

Why would Mordret run a real charity? And do so earnestly,

voluntarily, and with no secret agenda to boot?

Sunny did not have shadow sense at the moment, while his other senses had been suppressed to the level of a mundane person. However, he still had his experience, instinct, and intuition — and yet, everything was telling him that there was nothing sinister or shady about the Center for Troubled Youths.

Even the Devil Detective's dormant hostility could not find fault with this place.

Effie scratched the back of her head.

"Very weird."

Sunny was inclined to agree. It was indeed extremely weird… but there was nothing they could do about it. In fact, why would they want to do something? It was strange to be unhappy that the youths weren't being exploited for nefarious purposes.

He shook his head.

"Anyway, did you find out anything?"

Effie remained silent for a moment, then nodded.

"Oh… yes, sure. The victim was indeed a resident of this youth center at some point. However, he graduated successfully around a year ago. Many of these kids either get sponsored by the Valor Group and go on to receive higher education or are helped with seeking employment. The Valor Group has countless entry-level positions… so, most of the latter end up being employed internally."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"So, the victim was an employee of the Valor Group?"

Effie nodded.

"Indeed. In fact, he worked in its Corporate Security Branch… basically, he was a security guard. And not only that, he was posted in the Valor Group's main office."

Sunny's gaze grew sharper.

"Oh? Meaning…"

Effie grinned.

"Indeed. He had a chance to interact with Mordret on a daily basis. So if you wanted a reason to go and pay that bastard a visit… congratulations! Wishes do come true."

Sunny smiled darkly, then looked at the sky.

The sky was obscured by a thick layer of clouds, so he grimaced and looked at his watch instead.

Then, he cursed quietly.

"Hey… how the hell do I read time from an analogue watch?"

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"What's an analogue watch?"

It took them a couple of minutes to figure out the barbaric technology of the bygone era. Determining that it was already evening, Sunny sighed.

"I don't think we'll be able to catch Mordret at work at the moment. So… let's pay him a visit tomorrow morning?"

Effie shrugged.

"Sure. So… are we clocking out, then?"

Her voice was lacking enthusiasm, which prompted Sunny to give her a long look.

"If you don't want to go home, you can crash at my place. Granted, the Devil Detective was not the cleanest of people… but since I doubt that you'll be scared away by a little mess, it should be fine."

She smiled.

"Is that your way of calling me a slob? In any case… thanks, but no thanks. I don't think that abandoning her children and spending the night at a strange man's place would be in character for my counterpart. So, I'll head home…"

She looked around, then added sheepishly:

"Or rather, I'll trouble you to drive me home, partner. I barely figured out how to get to the crime scene after receiving the call — now, I am completely turned around."

Sunny sighed and unlocked the archaic PTV.

"Sure, no problem. Get in… partner."

Chapter-2468: Home Bitter Home

It was already late when Sunny returned to his dark, dusty apartment. Unlocking the door, he walked inside, closed it, then gave it a long look.

'How fun.'

The door was made from a sheet of ordinary metal, while the walls around it were nothing but concrete panels. In other words, even a Dormant Nightmare Creature could easily rip through the door or crash through the walls… but then again, there were no abominations in this world. So, these pitiful safety measures could very well stop anyone uninvited from entering the apartment.

That said, the Devil Detective was a paranoid guy — and for a good reason. As a cop, he had a lot of enemies, and his nasty temperament did not earn him any friends either. So, one of the empty bottles scattered around the apartment actually served a purpose.

Following a habit that belonged to someone else, Sunny locked the door and carefully balanced the bottle on its handle. That way, if someone picked the locks and tried to enter quietly in the middle of the night, the bottle was going to fall and break loudly, alerting him to the presence of an intruder.

Sunny was usually guarded by one of the shadows, so this level of caution felt both unfamiliar and new.

Turning away from the door, he studied his place of residence.

Dust everywhere, empty bottles and plastic food containers scattered on the floor, oil stains and streaks on every glass surface…

With a sigh, Sunny removed the bottle from the door handle and opened the curtains. Then, he rolled up his sleeves and got to cleaning.

An hour or two later, after a few visits to the nearby trash containers, the apartment finally started to resemble a place suitable for human life. Locking the door once more, Sunny lowered himself into a threadbare armchair and let out a heavy sigh.

It was ridiculous to admit, but this little amount of physical activity had tired him out. His muscles ached… not from battling some terrible Nightmare Creature, but from fighting mundane thugs and dust!

'Such an… indignity…'

He was sleepy.

Before dragging his tired body to the bed, however, Sunny took the primitive communicator out of his pocket, struggled against the unfamiliar interface for a while, and finally managed to dial the number Saint had given him.

For a few moments, strange noises poured into his ear. Then, the enthralling voice of his supposed therapist resounded from the communicator, making Sunny shiver against his will.

"Yes?"

He lingered for a few moments, then spoke in a neutral tone.

"Dr. Saint, good evening. This is… Detective Sunless from Mirage PD. I wanted to discuss future therapy sessions…"

A few minutes later, he put down the communicator and closed his eyes. The echoes of Saint's voice were still resounding in his ears.

'This is so strange. To hear her talk.'

Before Sunny knew it, he fell into the soft embrace of sleep.

…In a different part of Mirage City, earlier, Effie had spent a long

time standing in front of the door of a small, cozy villa. Eventually, she took a deep breath, put on a bright smile, and walked in.

"Mooommy!"

"Mama!"

Two energetic kids rushed to her, their faces shining with happiness and adoration. Effie leaned down to catch them, then lifted them into the air, feeling little arms wrap around her neck and kisses being planted on her cheeks.

"Mommy is home!"

"Mama! Mama!"

Failing to resist the overflowing cuteness, Effie nuzzled the children. Her forced smile gradually turned into a natural one.

"Oh, my! Who are these little darlings? Are you my kids? No way! My precious children were way smaller when I left home… how did you grow up this much in just a day? Huh? If this continues, you'll be carrying mommy instead by the end of the week…"

The children giggled as she brought them into the living room.

"Noooo…"

Effie let the babysitter go, then got busy caring for the children herself. She prepared them food with unfamiliar ingredients, read them unfamiliar books, played unfamiliar games with them, and helped them wash in an unfamiliar bathroom.

Her counterpart's children were younger than her dumpling was… he had grown up too fast, which left her feeling wistful. So, spending time with these little cuties lifted her mood.

Of course, they weren't children at all. The cute little boy and the adorable little girl who called her mommy were the Others… the terrifying, unfathomable beings forced into the shape of children by the Great Mirror.

But they looked so real, and acted so real… more than that, her counterpart's dreamlike memories were still flowing like a hazy river in her mind — memories full of real love and affection for these tiny bundles of joy and innocence, just like she was full of fierce love and affection for her own.

It was a maddening contradiction, to find herself caring for little children who treated her like their mother, but were not hers… children who were innocent and pure, but at the same time monstrous and frightening.

Effie could feel herself reeling.

But despite all that, and even knowing better…

She simply could not bring herself to treat them like monsters. Perhaps it was the mother in her, but the sight of the childlike smiles made her heart both flutter and ache.

'Ah. What am I going to do…'

At some point, her counterpart's husband returned from work.

He was tall, he was handsome, he was gentle and sweet…

But he wasn't her husband. He was not the man she loved — his features were different, his voice was different, his smile was different… and for that reason, everything about him was hateful.

The kids were asleep, and now, it was time for her and her supposed husband to go to bed, too.

However, Effie was not having it.

"Here. You go sleep on the couch."

She handed the startled man a rolled-up blanket and a pillow.

He looked at her with eyes full of confusion.

"Uh… darling? W—what did I do?"

Effie smiled.

Indeed, what did the poor guy do? She couldn't really tell him that there was only one man allowed into her bed — her husband — and that he was not that man… that he was not even a man. He was an Other pretending to be one.

So, Effie employed a tactic tried and tested by countless generations of women.

Giving the Other Husband an offended look, she said in a wrathful tone:

"You have the gall to ask? Wow… just wow. Go figure it out! You'll be sleeping on the couch until you do!"

The man paled.

"B—but, darling…"

Not hearing any objections, she pushed him out of the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

Finally alone, Effie let out a relieved sigh.

Looking at her empty bed, she then sighed again.

"Damn, was I swindled? I really can't see how any of this will help me become Supreme... ah, I want to go home..."

Chapter-2469: World of Abundance

The next morning, Sunny parked his PTV in front of Effie's home in a foul mood. She was standing there with a brown paper bag in her hand, holding the umbrella with the other and yawning. When he opened the door, she climbed in and gave him a reproachful look.

"You're late."

Sunny cursed under his breath.

"Do you know what I had to do on the way here?"

Effie shrugged.

"No idea. Why?"

Sunny gave the steering wheel of the PTV an annoyed push.

"I had to refuel this piece of junk! Again!"

She stared at him in shock.

"What? No way. These things need to be refueled daily?"

He nodded a few times.

"That's what I'm saying! That pungent, flammable fuel? Turns out, they burn through it faster than I burn through essence!"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then shook her head and put on her seatbelt.

"No, but really... daily? What a hassle."

Sunny was inclined to agree.

As they drove to their destination, Effie explained what she managed to salvage from her counterpart's memory last evening. Most of it had to do with police procedures and protocols they had to follow — paperwork, briefing the press, coordinating with other teams, and so on.

"Actually, I already received a phone call from the Captain. There is going to be a press conference tomorrow afternoon, where I am supposed to make a statement to answer a few questions. The journalists are dying to know about the Nihilist and his latest victim — obviously, they are also dying to castigate the Police Department and lament the lack of progress in catching him. I'm the designated punching bag, I guess."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"That should be nothing new for you, though? You've been the propaganda machine's favorite ever since the Forgotten Shore. Remember those posters of you they plastered all around NQSC? The first batch, I mean…"

Effie stared at him for a few moments, then laughed.

"Oh, gods! You saw those? Wow… made an impression, did I?"

Well, her armor certainly did...

Sunny scoffed.

"Some of them took entire facades of huge buildings. You were hard to miss."

She grinned and looked into the window, at the colorful billboards decorating the buildings of Mirage City. They were propaganda posters, as well… only of a different, far more subtle kind. Instead of the government pushing a false narrative onto its citizens to control the population, these were made by private enterprises to manipulate people into consuming their goods.

It was hard to tell which was more invasive.

"It is both wonderful and sinister, don't you think?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed to the city outside the window.

"This world… a world of abundance. Of prosperity so extreme and staggering that it has become a problem in and of itself. A world that is based on endless growth, and therefore can never allow itself to slow down — even a little, even for a brief moment, no matter if there is still a reason to rush forward or not."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"To be honest, I am not very familiar with how the world was before the Dark Times. I only know the romantic version of it — the great golden age of humanity before all the problems started, and all that. A lost era of peace and prosperity. People usually talk about this time as some kind of a lost paradise."

Effie smiled.

"I guess it was, for a while. As close to a paradise as we have ever come."

She sighed.

"Of course, the construction of that paradise was financed by borrowing from the future, which ended up causing all those problems to begin with, when the time to pay up arrived. Still… I like it here."

She opened her paper bag and pulled out a small carton painted in brown and white.

"Do you know what this is?"

Sunny almost flinched. That tone, that glint in her eyes — he knew it all too well! It was the look of insatiable avarice and utter obsession… which Sunny himself wore when looking at soul shards

and piles of treasure.

'What is she...'

Effie drew in a shaky breath.

"This… this just might be the greatest invention humanity has ever made. It is called... chocolate milk! This era has it, but ours doesn't, so how can I be critical of the past? The world has really gone to crap since then..."

Opening the carton, she took a big sip and leaned back with a blissful smile.

"Aaahhh…"

Sunny gave her a dubious look.

"Did you, by any chance, steal this from your kids?"

Effie gave him a look of outrage.

"What? Of course not! I just… they still have apple juice, okay?"

Sunny shook his head reproachfully.

"Uh-huh. Well, do you at least have another carton so I could try it, too?"

Effie brought the paper back closer to her chest, looking at him defensively.

"N—no?"

He looked at her in indignation.

"Wait, you didn't just go on and on singing praises to this chocolate milk of yours without planning to share it with your senior, did you?"

Effie stared at him with an open mouth for a while.

"Listen, senior. I'm a growing girl…"

Sunny almost choked.

"A growing girl? Where are you planning to grow?! If you grow any more, your head will punch through the roof!"

Effie grinned.

"What, jealous?"

Instead of answering, Sunny snatched her paper bag.

"Hey! Give it back!"

…The car swayed slightly, continuing on its way.

Soon enough, they reached the headquarters of the Valor Group. The building was hard to miss — it was almost the same height as the dormitory hives in NQSC, towering above the landscape like a glass spire. It was impossible to see its tip when standing on the ground below, no matter how much one craned their neck, and trying was enough to make one's head spin.

Effie whistled.

"You know, the Valor Group used to have its main offices in a different skyscraper, which was the tallest building in Mirage City. But then, a different conglomerate built one that was even taller. And then a third conglomerate built one even taller than that… until the Valor Group built this one, which is the current tallest."

She grinned.

"These guys really like to measure whose tower is the biggest, huh? I wonder what can be behind their obsession with tower sizes…"

Sunny stared at the glass skyscraper for a few moments.

"I'm not really interested in their tower-measuring contests. By the way… what does the Valor Group even do? I mean, what's their business?"

Effie scratched her head.

"Everything is their business. Your communicator? They made it. Your PTV? They built it. Your apartment complex? They both built it and own it. Your furniture, your clothes, your food… your cops, your politicians — anything you point at in Mirage City, chances are, it exists because of the Valor Group."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

'How bizarre.'

Then, he looked at her and smiled.

"So… let's go take the CEO of the Valor Group down, shall we?"

Effie chuckled.

"I thought you'd never ask…"

Chapter-2470: Glass Spire

The lobby of the Valor Tower was as glamorous and quietly oppressive as its exterior — so much so that Sunny and Effie, the only two people not wearing smart business suits here, looked woefully out of place.

Effie was stunning enough to turn heads, but her lackadaisical athleisure ensemble seemed too casual and sloppy… as for Sunny, his cheap, nondescript cop clothes looked outright shabby and inappropriate in this grandiose temple to money and power.

Nevertheless, both carried themselves with absolute confidence, as if they owned the place, which only brought them more attention.

'Here we go.'

Walking over to the vast reception desk, Sunny showed his badge to the nearest receptionist.

"Detective Sunless and Detective Athena of Mirage PD. We are here to meet Mr. Mordret."

The young woman looked between the two of them with a lost expression — at least for a moment. Then, her training kicked in. Her expression instantly changed to that of an extremely polite brick wall, and she said with a flawlessly neutral smile:

"Oh… oh, I see. Do you have an appointment?"

Sunny mentally translated her words…

'No chance in hell. Be gone, peasants!'

Of course, not just anybody could meet the CEO of the Valor Group. In fact, very few people could, and a couple of lowly detectives were

definitely not in that small, exceedingly elite club.

He responded to the receptionist's smile with one of his own.

"No. Do you have hearing loss?"

She blinked.

"Excuse me?"

Effie leaned on the desk languidly.

"My partner was wondering which part of what he had said you failed to hear. Was it 'detective' or 'Mirage PD'? Or do you just think that police officers have nothing to do all day and would seek out your CEO without a reason? We have an important and official reason to see him, so hurry up and get him into a room with us."

Sunny raised an eyebrow and waved his badge in the air.

"Or are you blind? Did you perhaps not see our identification?"

The receptionist maintained her professional smile.

"I am not sure I..."

Effie shook her head and said loudly:

"Wait, no. They wouldn't keep a deaf, blind girl at the reception — that'd just be cruel. Perhaps they simply don't care that the Nihilist is walking around killing people."

By then, they were already being slowly surrounded by security guards, who weren't even trying to be subtle about it.

Sunny sighed, and then added in a similarly loud tone:

"Killing people, including their own colleagues! My, what a shame… it seems that the Valor Group treats police officers with contempt and is refusing to help the investigation. Are they just callous, or do they have something to hide? Goodness gracious, what a sad turn of events…"

He felt a little guilty about putting the poor receptionist on the spot. Gods knew she was probably just hoping to get through the day… but at the same time, she was guarding the gates of hell, so a bit of torment came with the territory.

The security guards had surrounded him and Effie by that point, looking at each other with troubled expressions. The loud voices had also gathered a small crowd… if office workers were known for one thing, it was that they often suffered from boredom. So, they were not going to miss a bit of drama to fuel the gossip.

That was what Sunny wanted. He knew, of course, that getting to Mordret was not going to be easy — in fact, it was all but impossible in the short term.

Even if an employee of the Valor Group had been killed by the Nihilist, that did not mean that they could just go and interrogate the CEO… they would have to go through a chain of increasingly important people first, starting from some poor exec and working their way upward from there.

So, he was fully prepared for that long and arduous process. Making a scene in the lobby was merely the first step — the threat of a public disturbance would force someone in the hierarchy of the Valor Group to appease them, which was going to be a start.

Effie sighed and reached into her paper bag to produce a sandwich. Unwrapping it slowly, she said:

"Well, what can we do? I guess I won't have anything to tell the press tomorrow… just that our attempts at cooperation with the Valor Group were, sadly, met with a pronounced lack of enthusiasm. It just breaks my heart to imagine what people will say the next time the Nihilist strikes… could it have been prevented? Could the Valor Group have helped? I guess we'll never know…"

The receptionist paled a little, then exchanged a series of glances with a senior colleague. Finally, she smiled weakly.

"Oh, no… I'm afraid you misunderstood, detectives. Let me contact a superior and see what I can do. Please make yourself comfortable!

Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Sunny once again translated her words:

'Shut up and stop making a scene, bastards! Go sit in a corner like good children while we find a scapegoat to entertain you for a bit!'

At the same time, an avalanche of phone calls would probably descend on the Homicide Division Captain, who would get screamed at by half a dozen people to remind him to keep his subordinates under control.

Sunny glanced at the nervous security guards, then at the receptionist.

Eventually, he shrugged.

"I don't want coffee. Do you have chocolate milk?"

The receptionist gave him a very strange look.

"Wha... I'm not sure?"

Sunny frowned.

"Then that won't do…"

But before he could continue to apply pressure to hopefully get a more important scapegoat, and therefore shave off a couple of steps to the unreachable, deific CEO of the all-powerful Valor Group, a pleasant voice suddenly resounded from behind.

"Excuse me. Perhaps I can help?"

Sunny froze.

Effie did, too.

They glanced at each other tensely, then slowly turned around.

Behind them, a striking man in an immaculately tailored, slightly flamboyant yet elegant suit was standing in a circle of bodyguards.

He seemed to be around thirty, tall and in perfect shape, with pale skin and raven-black hair. His face was on the sharper side… not exactly handsome, but at the same time charming and strangely beautiful. Everything about him screamed of wealth and class — the emerald fabric of his bespoke suit, the subtle splendor of his luxury watch, the precious gemstones on his cufflinks and tie pin…

But more than wealth, the man emanated the feeling of power.

It was a different kind of presence from the oppressive aura his father used to possess. Instead, the man seemed friendly and mild. And yet, anyone could tell that he was someone extraordinary simply because of how absolutely relaxed and at ease he seemed — as if nothing in the world could possibly pose a problem to him.

His tie was loose, and a few buttons of his designer shirt were stylishly missing. There was an easy, relaxed smile on his face, and a spark of curiosity in his strange eyes… his eyes that resembled two pools of liquid silver, reflecting the world back on itself.

Noticing their strange expressions, the man blinked a few times.

"Oh, where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself…"

But of course, the man needed no introduction.

He was the young CEO of the Valor Group…

Mordret.

Chapter-2471: A Happy Family

The young heir of the Valor Group seemed friendly and easygoing — charming, even, with his elegant manners and disarming smile. And yet, Sunny and Effie saw subtle signs of tension and wariness reflected back to them from his mirror-like eyes.

Tension and wariness written on their own faces.

How could they not be alarmed? This was Mordret, the Prince of Nothing… a man who was no different from a wicked demon, only more sinister by far. Sure, Sunny had foiled Mordret's plans repeatedly, but that did not make the mirror wraith any less threatening.

The remains of the House of Night could attest to that.

From the mild and innocent look in the Valor Group CEO's eyes, though, he did not seem to remember his true self. But then again, this was Mordret they were talking about — the man was more adept in deception and acting than even Sunny himself was. Had he truly forgotten who he was, or was he merely pretending?

There was no way to tell.

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other. Then, he spoke with a neutral expression:

"Good morning, Mr. Mordret. I am Detective Sunless, and this is Detective Athena from the Homicide Division of the Mirage City Police. We were hoping to speak to you regarding an ongoing investigation."

Mordret studied them for a moment.

"Well, in that case, why don't we speak in my office? If there is

anything I can do to help you catch that terrible man, naturally, I must help."

Sunny blinked.

'That easy? What is he playing at?'

At that moment, one of the bodyguards whispered something in Mordret's ear. Mordret glanced at Sunny, then shrugged with a faint smile.

"Oh, I am sure that Detective Sunless had his reasons. There must have been some misunderstanding."

With that, he gestured to the elevators.

"Please, follow me."

Sunny and Effie followed him, only to find out that there was a separate, far more luxurious elevator that seemed to be accessible only to the CEO. As they ascended the impressive length of the Valor Tower, Mordret's bodyguards were drilling holes in their backs with hostile stares — their employer, meanwhile, seemed perfectly at ease.

"Detective Athena… I am quite sorry to presume, but have we met before? You seem familiar."

Sunny frowned, wondering if that was Mordret's way of hinting that he remembered them. Effie forced out a smile.

"I really don't think so. Where would a humble public servant like me meet the illustrious CEO of the Valor Group?"

Mordret lingered a little bit, then suddenly beamed.

"Athena… oh! Why, of course. Weren't you a national athlete? You really made us proud! I still remember the spear throw that won you the first golden medal… it was such a marvelous sight. I can't believe I get to meet you!"

Effie coughed.

"Oh, that… right. That was so many years ago, though. I'm surprised you remember."

Mordret smiled.

"Our family is very passionate about sports. A representative of Mirage City bringing home a whole collection of medals — how could I ever forget?"

'What the hell is going on?'

Sunny suddenly felt out of place. Why was he riding an elevator with Mordret, and why was Mordet fanboying over meeting Effie? What kind of bizarreness was this?

Soon enough, they arrived in a lavish office that took up most of the uppermost floor of the Valor Tower. The walls were made out of armored glass, so one could see most of Mirage City from here, sprawled far below and stretching toward the horizon. The people populating it looked like ants from the height… and perhaps that was what they were for someone as powerful as the CEO of the Valor Group.

The most stunning thing in Mordret's office was not the view, though, and not the unimaginably expensive decor either. Rather, it was a large framed photo hanging on the wall like a cherished art piece.

On it, a smiling man and a beautiful woman were looking into the camera, embracing a sullen teenage boy and an adorable girl with black locks. There were a few other people there, as well, all surrounded by a happy and affectionate atmosphere.

Sunny recognized them, of course — they were the Valor family, both those whom he met and those who had perished many years ago.

The teenage boy and the younger girl were Mordret and Morgan. The beautiful woman was Gwyn of Valor… the smiling man was Anvil.

Sunny stared at the photo with wide eyes.

Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he would see the King of Swords smiling happily one day.

'What the...'

Noticing his gaze, Mordret smiled as well.

"Not as scary as people say, are we?"

He chuckled and pointed at a dignified old man standing behind the smiling pair.

"This is my grandfather, the founder of the Valor Group — an outstanding engineer and a man of keen business acumen. Everything around us exists because of his hard work and leadership. He is retired now, of course, spending his days tinkering with old machines and pestering his grandkids to hurry up and produce newer models — great grandkids, I mean — for him to boss around."

Sunny looked at the old man.

'Warden of Valor…'

Mordret, meanwhile, pointed to the happy couple.

"You must be familiar with my parents. As much as the Valor Group only exists because of grandpa, it became what it is today thanks to my father. Oh, they mostly devote themselves to traveling and charitable work these days… really, mom and dad hatched a plan to escape into early retirement as soon as I was old enough to become the CEO. How heartless!"

Mordret chuckled again, then glanced at the little girl in the photo and fell silent for a moment. Then, he smiled pleasantly and gestured to an opulent sofa.

"Please, take a seat. Your… chocolate milk?... will be here in a moment."

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other.

'What the hell is this?'

Warden of Valor had perished in the Third Nightmare. Gwyn died in childbirth when Mordret was around two. Anvil was slain by Sunny

in Godgrave… where did this vision of a happy family come from?

Why had the Palace of Imagination created this fantasy for Mordret?

And why was Mordret acting as if it was the most natural thing in the world? He hated his family… his hatred of Valor was so scathing and deep that a whole Great Clan had been callously used as kindling to fuel his vengeance.

Did he… really not remember anything?

Even if he didn't, wasn't this persona too big of a departure from his true self? The Devil Detective and his rookie partner were not Sunny and Effie, true, but they were similar people.

This version of Mordret, though, seemed… eerily well-adjusted and harmless. Not like his true self at all.

As they sat down, Mordret lowered himself into a chair and asked in a pleasant tone:

"So, what did you want to discuss?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then said in a measured tone:

"We wanted to discuss the Nihilist."

He watched Mordret closely, hoping to see a reaction.

However, Mordret did not react in any particular way… as if there was no connection between him and the deranged serial killer at all.

Sunny frowned.

'But there is. There definitely is... is there?'

Chapter-2472: Presumption of Innocence

Mordret showed no reaction to Sunny mentioning the Nihilist — outside of how a normal person would react, that was. Unease, discomfort, and a hint of indignation showed on his face, but nothing more.

If he was acting, the man deserved to be a lead performer in a renowned theater.

But then again, that was exactly what Mordret was capable of.

He sighed and shook his head.

"I see. I heard there was a new victim?"

Effie nodded.

"Indeed. The body was discovered yesterday, in a park by the river."

Mordret seemed saddened by the news, but also a little curious.

"How very tragic. However, detectives… I wonder why you deemed it necessary to speak to me, of all people?"

His expression was full of innocent confusion.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Well, you see, the victim was an employee of yours. A graduate of one of the Valor Group's charities and a security guard right here in this building."

Hearing the name, Mordret seemed genuinely shocked.

"That young man? But… but I greeted him only two days ago."

Sunny nodded solemnly.

"I'm afraid so. Did you interact with him often?"

Before Mordret could answer, one of his people leaned in and whispered something into his ear. He frowned, and a hint of anger suddenly flashed in his mirror-like eyes.

"...Why would I need to have a lawyer present? What nonsense!"

He sent the man away and turned to Sunny and Effie with an awkward expression.

"I'm sorry. My employees can be... overzealous, at times. Obviously, the Valor Group will help the investigation in any way we can — just tell me what you need, detectives."

Sunny remained silent for a while. He was starting to become convinced that Mordret had not regained his memories… but even then, that did not absolve him of being the Nihilist.

It was hard to imagine this pleasant, affable, sleek and polished man stalking the streets of Mirage City at night to carve out people's eyes.

There was no madness in his own eyes, no murderous intent… more than that, there was no killing instinct in them whatsoever. Sunny was a killer himself, so he knew killers well — despite that, his senses told him that the CEO of the Valor Group was nothing but soft, pampered by life, and harmless.

But then again, he had been fooled by Mordret before.

He could even imagine a number of bizarre scenarios… the memories of the real Mordret only awakening at night, for example, then disappearing when the moon vanished behind the horizon, so that the man woke up genuinely unaware of what his true self did while he slept. Who said that such nonsense was impossible?

Sunny hesitated a little, then decided to stop wasting time.

"Well… first, it would really help us to know where you were on the night of the murder."

Mordret looked at him in confusion for a few moments, then opened his eyes wide in disbelief.

"Am… I a suspect?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Sure. Why not?"

Mordret studied him for a bit, then suddenly exploded with laughter.

"I'm… I'm sorry! I know that this is no laughing matter, but me? Me, going around killing people? What a ridiculous notion."

He shook his head.

"What reason would I have to do something that ghastly, detective?"

Sunny met his amused gaze, with not a hint of nervousness in it, and sighed.

"Well, to be honest, we haven't quite figured out such a reason yet."

Mordret raised an eyebrow.

"I see. Then, perhaps, a better question would be — what reason do you have to suspect me?"

He seemed genuinely curious.

Sunny and Effie exchanged a glance. Then, she leaned forward a little.

"Do you really not know, or are you just pretending not to know?"

Mordret blinked a few times.

"Know what?"

Effie clicked her tongue.

"About the evidence found on the first crime scene, naturally. Just a few drops of blood that did not belong to the victim… instead, Mr. Mordret, it belonged to you. The DNA test confirmed it."

He looked at her with an utterly lost expression.

"My blood was discovered at a crime scene? Surely you jest, Detective Athena."

Sunny frowned, dismayed that there was still not the slightest indication that Mordret was lying to them.

"Do you mean to tell us that you had no idea about that DNA sample? I find it hard to believe, considering how persistently we were forbidden from pursuing that avenue of investigation. Somebody knew, and somebody gave an order to suppress the investigation. Oh… was that done by those overzealous employees of yours without your order, as well?"

Mordret remained silent for a while, the amused expression slowly draining from his face. Eventually, he looked at his subordinates scornfully.

"...I understand you find it hard to believe, detective, but I really had no idea that such a DNA sample existed before you told me. Still… if memory serves, I was at a very public charity dinner on the night the Nihilist claimed his first victim. There should be plenty of video recordings showing me mingling with the guests."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Video recordings can be doctored."

Mordret looked at him with curiosity.

"And I guess witness testimonies can be bought off? But, detective, there is a flaw in your logic. Wouldn't it be much easier for someone to plant my DNA at a crime scene?"

Sunny glared at him for a few moments, then admitted reluctantly:

"Sure. A few drops of blood could have been planted. But who would

go that far to frame you?"

Mordret remained silent before letting out a bitter sigh and looking away.

"I have countless enemies, detectives. Sadly, that comes with the job."

It did not escape Sunny's attention that Mordret looked at the family photo while saying that.

So… there was trouble in paradise, after all.

Sunny leaned forward a little.

"Anyone in particular come to mind?"

Then, he added with a faint smile:

"How is your sister doing, by the way?"

For the first time, Mordret's expression showed a sign of cracking.

What was revealed behind the pleasant smile was not the heartless malevolence of his true self, however. Instead, it was… pain? Sorrow? Confusion?

Mordret froze for a few moments, then leaned back and looked at Sunny with a cold expression.

"My sister can't be behind this. She… has suffered a psychotic break a while back."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"A psychotic break?"

Mordret nodded slowly.

"She… might have… tried to harm me, in her compromised state. She is now receiving treatment in a reputable establishment — she hardly could have done anything from there."

'Did Morgan try to kill Mordret?'

That would surely make a lot of sense, considering what she had told him.

Sunny summed up what they had learned.

The Great Mirror version of Mordret seemed to have no memories of his true self. There was no concrete evidence connecting him to the murders, and the man himself seemed eerily innocent. Clan Valor was one big, loving family in this fantastical realm, and Morgan had tried to kill her brother some time ago, which landed her in a psychiatric hospital…

For her own good, if Mordret was to be believed.

'Damn it. I think I understand even less now.'

Morgan… Morgan had all the answers, it seemed.

Sunny looked at the family portrait of the Valor family with a dark expression.

"We might have a talk with your sister, then."

Mordret's expression changed.

"Absolutely not. Under no circumstances will you — or anyone else — disturb my sister. She doesn't need more shock and trauma to distract her from healing."

His voice sounded cold and absolute, showing the terrifying authority of the ruler of the Valor Group for the first time.

Sunny wanted to respond, but at that moment, Effie leaned forward and put a hand on Mordret's shoulder.

And said:

"Hey. Mordret… snap out of it."

'What is she doing?!'

Sunny's eyes widened slightly, and so did Mordret's.

For a few moments, the luxurious office was silent.

Then, something changed in Mordret's gaze.

He suddenly seemed…

Confused, and a little bit embarrassed?

Taking Effie's hand gently, he awkwardly removed it from his shoulder and asked in a hesitant tone:

"Excuse me, Detective Athena? Snap out of what?"

Effie frowned, then retracted her arm and cleared her throat.

"That… uh… just saying. Never mind."

She looked at Sunny and raised an eyebrow.

Whatever authority she had as the master of Bastion did not seem to have affected Mordret at all. He was still blissfully devoid of any memories... allegedly.

He was also quite keen on seeing them off now.

A charming smile returned to his face.

"As I've said, I'll be glad to help the investigation in any way I can. We can request the personal file of the unfortunate victim from the Human Resources… security footage of his latest shift can also be arranged. I'm afraid I will have to hand you over to my assistants now, detective — please excuse me, but my schedule today is quite full."

Just like that, the meeting was over. Before too long, Sunny and Effie found themselves standing in front of the Valor Tower, looking at it with somber expressions.

Effie sighed.

"Well. That was…"

But before she could finish, Sunny's communicator went off.

He took it out of his pocket, looked at it darkly, and pressed the green button to receive the call.

A moment later — and for a while longer — the Homicide Division Captain's angry screams could be heard flying out of the flimsy speaker.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Damnation...'

Chapter-2473: Comfortably Silent

Sunny spent the rest of the day being berated by the captain, filling out paperwork, and receiving reports from the medical examiner — not that there was anything useful to report.

Just like the previous victims, the latest one had various wounds that indicated that the poor young man had been in a desperate fight before being killed. The cause of death this time was severe spinal trauma — his neck had been broken. It was unclear whether the eyes had been removed before or after his death, but it had been done with surgical precision.

'Such a hassle.'

After dealing with these routine tasks, Sunny returned home late in the evening.

…This time, he remembered to power down his archaic PTV before walking away from it. As it turned out, these strange machines had no standby mode and had to be turned off completely every time.

'How primitive. My Rhino would never…'

Entering the apartment, he balanced the bottle on the door handle and sighed.

Turning on the TV — a primitive kind of entertainment center — to hear what was being said on the news, Sunny opened the closet and removed all the clothes from the hangers. Behind them, a seemingly chaotic mess of photos and printed documents was revealed, pinned to a large map of Mirage City and connected by red strings.

The Devil Detective had never stopped working the Nihilist case,

even if he had been suspended. The photos belonged to the victims of the serial killer, as well as to various persons of interest. The printed documents contained details about their identities, the crime scenes, and the autopsies. The red strings tied it all together… not unlike the Strings of Fate that tied all of existence together.

It was just that Sunny could not see the pattern that connected all these seemingly disjointed events in the red weave.

He could not see it yet…

The news came and went, containing no useful information at all. There was a lot of fearmongering concerning the Nihilist, as well as a few puff pieces about the Valor Group and its latest initiatives. Tomorrow, though, the news was going to be full of images of Effie, since she was supposed to give a briefing to the press.

Sunny turned back to the map of Mirage City, studying the clues.

Some time later, though, he threw a furtive glance at the TV.

The news report was over, and some kind of romantic fantasy drama was on the screen. Frowning derisively, Sunny looked back at the photos of the serial killer's victims.

Some time later, though, he found himself sitting in front of the TV, watching the drama intently.

"Wow. That… cultivation? Seems extremely bizarre, but does resemble the natural Awakening a bit. What are demonic and orthodox sects, though? Those orthodox guys seem like complete scumbags. Why did they even torture that girl? Just because she saved the Demon King's son? Bah! What a silly show…"

He wanted to return to the clues, but somehow found himself still glued to the screen an hour later.

"What are you doing, foolish girl! That handsome orthodox immortal is clearly harboring an inner demon after you kidnapped him and stared at him the whole night! Knowing that insufferable bore, he will go into seclusion for nine months and expel the inner demon, which will then take human form and come back to haunt you!"

It was like she had never suffered from a mind wraith before!

Outraged, Sunny wanted to change the channel… and yet, an hour later, he was still there.

"No, no, no… don't you see that the Sword Grave is a trap?! You'll never get the Sword of the Lightning Celestial. Instead, you are going to be ambushed by the Ten Orthodox Immortal Sects! What kind of a Demoness are you, fool? And that damn Demon King's son, why the hell is he not advising you better?"

And an hour later:

"Ah, I see. So the Demon King's son has reached the Lower-Middle Pinnacle of the True Peak of the Highest Pinnacle Realm of the Nascent Soul Domain while you were dead. And it only took him five years! Gods… even if you possessed the body of the Celestial Venerable's daughter, catching up to that fool won't be easy! Even worse, you still think that he betrayed you in the Sword Grave… tsk, just kiss already!"

And a bit later…

"No, Inner Demon, no! How can you just go and sacrifice yourself?! That obnoxious immortal spent nine whole months in seclusion expelling you, so you have to live! For mom and dad!"

...The morning came before he knew it.

***

Just like every day, Saint woke up before dawn broke. Her apartment was spacious and sparsely decorated, filled with a comfortable silence. The rain rustled quietly beyond the panoramic windows, and a thin line of pale lilac was spreading across the cloudy sky far in the distance, slowly dispelling the deep darkness shrouding the city.

She did not like to hurry, and so, her life was strictly timed and regimented. Every day was approached with forethought and calm precision, making the most out of each minute. Some people tended to compare Saint to an art piece… she rarely paid attention to their flattery, but she did like to think of her life as a piece of art.

As the artist, she had to craft each day with care to create a flawless masterpiece.

The morning was a time for exercise, personal hygiene, self-care, and nutrition — so, today, like every day, she started her day with an intense, hour-long exercise routine. Her body was the main tool with which she crafted her life; it was also the foundation of a healthy mind, so she made an effort to maintain it in perfect condition.

Exactly an hour later, Saint stopped her exercise and took a ten-minute shower while applying a cleanser lotion and an exfoliating scrub lotion, followed by gentle shampoo and conditioner. Ten more minutes were spent on skincare, followed by ten minutes spent on hair care. Finally, she prepared herself a simple omelet with greens and brewed herself a cup of black coffee.

Saint ate breakfast in silence while reading the news from a well-organized personal feed, marking several scientific articles to be studied later.

Finally, she put on an elegant ensemble prepared for this day at the start of the week and left home.

The traffic was sparse this early in the morning, and she did not listen to music, podcasts, or audiobooks while driving to work. Her car was filled with silence, with only the muted sounds of the waking city seeping inside.

Entering her neat and orderly office after approximately thirty minutes spent in transit, Saint spent ninety more minutes studying patient files and preparing herself for the day. At exactly nine in the morning, the door of her office opened, and her assistant walked in.

"Dr. Saint, your nine o'clock appointment is here."

She nodded.

"Please let them in."

This was the first sound she made since waking up four hours earlier.

Saint took meticulous notes while listening to the patient. After a

fifteen-minute break, she saw another client, then left for the rounds in the heavily guarded inpatient wing of her workplace.

Eventually, it was time for lunch.

Usually, Saint would have eaten a nutritious meal she had prepared herself, but today, she had a different commitment — even if skipping a meal was suboptimal, her pride as a professional took precedence.

Leaving the hospital, she drove to a nearby building where she was renting a small private office. Her patient was already waiting for her there, leaning on his dirty, ramshackle car while looking at the vista of the city with a distant expression.

The man himself was quite similar to his car. His clothes were cheap and wrinkled, his hair was disheveled, his complexion was unhealthily pale, while his eyes were bloodshot and red, with deep, dark circles beneath them.

Saint would have been quietly revolted on a usual day, but strangely enough, he seemed quite magnetic despite all that. There was a dark, roguish charm to his messy appearance and cold gaze. Saint also felt a pang of an odd emotion when she saw him.

It was not quite attraction, but more of… longing? Belonging? She could not tell, and was more than a little surprised at her odd reaction.

"Detective."

He looked at her, then smiled faintly.

"Hey, doc. Thank you for making time for me."

'Do I… like this man?'

Saint did not mean it in a romantic or physical sense, but simply as a person.

Well, it was no surprise. If there was one thing she valued in people, it was competence — an exceedingly rare trait, by her standards.

Saint was a prideful person who excelled in everything she did, and she judged others by the same criteria.

Detective Sunless was as brilliant as he was broken, and he was crafting his life with the same diligence she was… even if the masterpiece he was trying to create seemed more ghastly than beautiful — full of macabre themes and self-destructive tendencies, but impossible to look away from.

Saint hesitated for a moment.

Something about him seemed different today…

"Please. Come in."

Chapter-2474: The Devil's Therapist

Saint's private office was smaller than her space at the mental hospital, but better furnished. She prepared a cup of coffee for the patient — a simple act that put most people at ease, easing them into conversation. She usually offered tea to other patients, but considering the detective's chronic insomnia, coffee suited him better.

Naturally, the coffee she made was flawless. Every movement was measured and precise, designed to achieve the optimal result in the most efficient way.

Placing the elegant cup in front of the pale man, Saint took her seat opposite him and opened her notebook.

She would only be receiving a symbolic remuneration for this session. But that was fine, because she had never been driven by money.

Saint was not driven by compassion or kindness, either. In truth, she had extended an offer to continue treatment to this untidy man for a simple reason — professional pride. She hated leaving things unfinished and flawed, so the thought of letting him go without truly helping him felt distasteful.

"You look more fatigued than usual today, Detective. Has your insomnia worsened?"

He looked at her for a while, then shook his head.

"No. It's just that… the Demoness and the Demon King's Son. It took them fifty-six episodes to get together, can you believe that?"

Saint offered him a faint smile and nodded, writing a short sentence down in her notebook.

The detective fell silent, studying her closely.

She had noticed him staring before — few people could ever resist stealing glances her way — but today, his gaze was different. It was more inquisitive, somehow.

"You've returned to duty. That must have been quite a change of pace."

He lingered for a while, then nodded.

"Yes, well. It was an eye-opening experience. Especially after I met my new partner."

Saint silently raised an eyebrow, prompting him to continue.

The detective smiled.

"It was a bit ironic, really. We had gone through fire and water, she and I — and yet, she did not remember me at all before. But when we met this time, it was I who did not remember her. Luckily, she reminded me."

Then, his expression suddenly livened up.

"Oh. Actually, Dr. Saint… I had a real breakthrough thanks to her. My partner, I mean — you probably don't remember, but you two know each other. You arm-wrestled once… ah, my poor table…"

Saint frowned subtly.

What was he talking about?

She did not show much emotion on her face, though.

"What kind of breakthrough?"

The detective gave her a strange look.

"Oh… that... I really wish you didn't ask that question, doc."

His tone sounded a little embarrassed. He remained silent for a short while, then winced.

"Do you remember all those nightmares I told you about?"

Saint nodded.

'Is he finally able to sleep soundly? That's great!'

The detective took a deep breath, then let out a heavy sigh.

"Well, you see… I realized that they weren't nightmares at all."

Saint looked at him, encouraging him to tell her more.

He offered her a pale smile.

"Instead, they are the actual reality, and this place is one huge illusion."

Saint blinked.

"Excuse me?"

The detective nodded.

"In reality, I am a demigod known as Sunless, the Sovereign of Death, the Dark Lord of the Forgotten Shore, and the commander of the Shadow Legion. I am nearly immortal and possess seven bodies, each capable of destroying entire continents. Of course, most people assume that I was killed by the radiant goddess of humanity, Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame. But actually... she is my lover. Even if we recently had a fight while discussing the fate of the world."

Saint remained silent for a while. Then, she started to scribble something furiously in her notebook with an inscrutable expression.

'Oh, no. It's a complete breakdown? Schizophrenia? Delusion of grandeur? But there were no signs! Just PTSD and a small collection of mild personality disorders...'

The detective, meanwhile, continued.

"Yeah, so, anyway… I am also the heir of Weaver, the Demon of Fate,

currently on a quest to collect all seven fragments of their forbidden lineage. One of those fragments is hidden in the mirror labyrinth below the ruined castle of the Demon of Imagination, which was where I went in the company of Effie… Saint Athena. Actually, this whole city is an elaborate illusion contained within the Great Mirror that stands in the middle of the Mirror Maze. So, you see, I am one of the few real people here in Mirage City — everyone else is a creepy monster only pretending to be human."

Saint suppressed a scowl.

'This is bad… that last detail is a common symptom shared by many violent sociopaths.'

And what was that, his supposed companion was Athena? As in the beautiful maiden goddess of Olympus? Was he fixated on inventing romantic dalliances with goddesses now?

Where did that come from?!

She inhaled slowly.

"Do you… consider me not to be real, Detective?"

The detective looked at her in dismay, then shook his head.

"What? No, of course not! You are perfectly real, doctor. I mean, obviously, you've been brainwashed into believing that you are a mortal psychiatrist residing in Mirage City, which could not be further from the truth."

He coughed.

"In truth — in reality, I mean — you are the Onyx Saint, my most valued and loyal Shadow. You've been serving me faithfully for more than a decade, following my every command and satisfying my every whim… ever since I killed you. The original you, I mean. By the way, it occurs to me that I've never thanked you for that... so, thank you. It really means a lot."

Saint slowly lowered her notebook and looked at the cold, darkly charming man.

The man who had been strangely obsessed with a serial killer called the Nihilist ever since the two of them met.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that they were alone in the building, with not a living soul in earshot.

'He has completely lost it.'

No… maybe he had been completely crazy this whole time.

How had she missed it?

Saint looked around subtly, her gaze lingering on a decorative sword that hung on the wall — a garish gift from one of her patients, which she had not had the heart to throw out.

"Detective… when was the last time you took your medication?"

Maybe he was just delirious from the lack of sleep…

He blinked a few times.

"Oh, my meds? I stopped taking them when I remembered who I really am. Even if I am temporarily trapped in a mortal body, I am still a demigod, you know. Those pills just make me feel loopy."

Saint sighed with regret.

'I skipped lunch for this…'

Chapter-2475: An Astute Deduction

Saint remained silent for a long while. Most people found her silence uncomfortable, awkwardly trying to fill it with meaningless conversations, but the detective seemed calm and at ease… as if he was deeply familiar with her taciturn nature.

She contemplated him somberly.

Was she in danger?

More importantly, how had she missed the signs of a looming mental breakdown?

Saint pursed her lips slightly. She had failed her patient… and so, her pride was wounded. It was an unpleasant feeling, and that feeling was only made irksome by her failure to pinpoint the origin of her mistake.

She looked at the unstable man sitting across from her.

Wrinkled clothes, unkempt hair, a pale face, a manic glint in his dark eyes…

The detective looked back at her and smiled faintly, but his smile never reached the cold depths of his eerie gaze.

'The Sovereign of Death, was it?'

Eventually, Saint tapped her pen against her notebook twice.

"Let me share a few thoughts, Detective."

His smile widened.

"Oh… by all means, doc."

She leaned forward a little and spoke in a calm, indifferent tone:

"It has been several days since you returned to service. Coincidentally, the seventh victim of the Nihilist was discovered at the same time… I strongly suspect that you immediately found a way to insinuate yourself into the case."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Well, that is an easy guess. After all, you know all about my history with that guy, as well as how I ended up suspended and sent to therapy. There is hardly anyone in this world who knows me better than you, really."

Saint continued, her voice maintaining its aloof cadence:

"The identity of the victim has not been disclosed yet — I imagine that is happening as we speak at the press conference arranged by the Mirage City Police Department. However, I did see a relevant title while looking through the news articles this morning… it seems that the CEO of the Valor Group had a conversation with two homicide detectives yesterday. You must have been one of those detectives, so it is safe to say that you have not given up on the theory that there is a connection between Mr. Mordret and the Nihilist."

He frowned.

"Right, you would know about that, too… still, what an astute deduction. It seems that your talents are being wasted on psychiatry, doc. Have you ever considered becoming a detective, instead?"

Saint ignored the question and looked at him coldly.

"Naturally, the CEO of the Valor Group is an exalted existence — he is not someone to be treated lightly, and he would not have given you a chance to take advantage of him. So, you failed to reinforce the narrative you believe in by meeting Mr. Mordret. Of course, considering your personality type, that did not convince you to abandon it. Rather, it only convinced you to change tactics."

This time, the detective did not say anything and simply studied her with curiosity.

Saint frowned slightly.

"Or rather, targets. You are a resourceful man, Detective, so you must have found out what Mr. Mordret's weakness is… and where she is being kept."

His expression changed subtly, but before he could say anything, Saint finished in an even tone:

"So, this whole conversation was an act. You wanted to manipulate me into committing you to as a resident patient, which would give you easy access to Miss Morgan. Bravo, Detective. I did not know that you were such a talented actor."

The detective coughed a few times and mumbled quietly:

"Oops..."

Then, he looked at her and smiled — the smile was seemingly meant to be bright, but considering his overall appearance, it ended up looking dark and a little threatening instead.

"Guilty as charged. But! That doesn't mean that what I said wasn't true. I am the most honest man in the world, you see — two worlds… wait, it's three at the moment, isn't it? The most honest man in three worlds, even. So I really meant all that stuff about being a demigod. I truly am."

Saint gave him an impassive look.

"Uh-huh."

With that, she closed her notebook, put the cap on her pen, and rose from her seat.

Looking at the pale man from above, she said:

"You attempted to use me, Detective. You also made me doubt my competence, which I do not appreciate. Therefore, I retract my offer

to continue these sessions. Let us never meet again… I do encourage you to find a different therapist, though. Be well."

With that, she headed for the door. He followed in a hurry, grabbing her arm.

"Wait a minute, Saint… I mean. Dr. Saint. Actually, I wanted you to meet my partner — she is going to be here soon. Any minute now! Things will be easier once…"

Turning her head slightly, Saint said in a voice so devoid of emotion that the man seemed to shiver:

"Detective… if you don't unhand me, I am going to break your arm."

She meant it, too.

Apart from maintaining her body in a perfect condition, Saint was naturally proficient in self-defense and several martial arts, including karate, taekwondo, judo, aikido, and several southern styles of wushu — a fact that she did not particularly like to advertise.

Martial arts were as much of a hobby for her as they were a necessity, considering how she looked and what kind of people she interacted with due to work. Mostly, however, they were a training tool. After all, what was the point of working on her body if she did not know how to use it?

Still, Detective Sunless was no random stranger. He was a seasoned fighter himself— and, unlike Saint, he had earned his experience in actual brawls, not on a clean tatami. Plus, he was a man… even if his stature was modest, she did not harbor any delusions about which one of them was physically stronger.

He could very well disregard her threat…

However, he did not.

In fact, the detective seemed to believe her promise a little too willingly, as if he was giving Saint more credit than she was giving herself.

Letting go of her arm, he took a hurried step back.

"N—no need to get violent, Saint! I mean… Dr. Saint. See? I let go."

Turning away with a frown, Saint headed for the door.

Just before leaving, she threw over her shoulder:

"Do not approach me again, Detective. If you do, I will revoke my assessment of your mental state and make sure that you never work in law enforcement again."

Her voice was indifferent, and her gaze was cold.

Closing the door behind her, Saint frowned.

Why did she feel so uncomfortable?

'Strange.'

Leaving him behind somehow felt profoundly wrong.

But it wasn't. It was what she ought to have done — one of life's golden rules was to never waste time on people who did not deserve it, after all, and Saint followed that rule faithfully.

Pursing her lips, she shook her head and walked away.

…Left alone in the office, Sunny winced and cursed quietly.

"Damnation. That did not go as planned at all. Where the hell is Effie? She was supposed to be here by now!"

But there was no sign of his partner.

Eventually, he sighed.

"Well… let's look at the bright side. At least my bones are still intact…"

Chapter-2476: Irregular Programming

By the time Sunny left the building, Saint was gone. He raised the collar of his jacket to prevent the rain from seeping under it and hid under the eaves of a nearby convenience store, taking out his communicator with an unhappy expression.

Effie was running late. She was supposed to call him as soon as her press conference was over and then arrive shortly after — today, they had hoped to make Saint remember who she truly was.

Obviously, that plan would have to be reworked now.

'Saint is too damn smart.'

He knew, of course, that his Shadow was highly intelligent. However, since she never spoke, Sunny never realized just how keenly astute she really was. It had taken her only a few minutes to deduce exactly what he was doing, why he was doing it, and what his end goal was.

How had she figured him out so swiftly? Sunny had improvised most of his confession on the spot, true, but his supposed mental breakdown was quite believable — after all, everything he had said was true. More than that, correctly guessing his interest in Morgan was not something he would have expected her to do.

It seemed that getting into the private wing of the mental institution was not going to be easy. His tentative plan to broaden the confines of what the Devil Detective's role allowed him to do by pretending to be mentally unstable, and therefore unpredictable, had not panned out either.

They would have to make Saint remember her true self — if his theory was sound and Effie could work her magic again — first... but

even that had become difficult now, since the taciturn therapist did not intend to see him ever again.

'Damn it.'

Sunny did not like being in Saint's bad books. That had literally never happened to him before.

Frustrated and full of discontent, he looked at his communicator, as if asking it why Effie had not called it.

The communicator…

Was dead.

Its screen was black, and it did not respond to anything Sunny did.

He blinked a few times.

'Don't tell me…'

Were these things supposed to be recharged daily, as well?!

'No... no way'

This was just too impractical!

Sunny stared at the dead device in utter shock for a while, then raised his hand in anger to toss the damn thing at the wall. Eventually, though, he let out a long sigh and lowered it, deciding to spare the battered communicator.

Not the least of all because he had no idea how to procure a new one.

Rummaging through the Devil Detective memories, Sunny found the vague recollection of how to use the primitive, unwieldy communicators of the bygone era… the mobile phones. Covering his face with a palm for a few moments, he groaned quietly, and then walked to his car.

Climbing inside, Sunny started the engine and found a threadbare cable that was supposed to serve as a charger. The port where the

cable was supposed to go seemed to have become loose over time, so he only managed to make the barbaric technology work after fiddling with it for a while... needless to say, his mood did not improve one bit as a result. Finally, the communicator started to charge.

A couple of minutes later, Sunny was able to turn it on. What met him was an angry notification denoting that he had a dozen missed calls.

To his frustration, raising the communicator resulted in the contact between the charging cable and the port being lost, so he had to wait a few more minutes before being able to return the call. He spent those minutes quietly seething and cursing the archaic technology of the past era.

'This might be a golden age, but charging things so often? And with wires, of all things?! Wires, really?!'

And the people! From what Sunny gleaned from the Devil Detective's memories, they were glued to these primitive things and obsessed with them, to the point of acting tribal. The communicator model you possessed denoted both your allegiance and social status, and those who used the wrong ones were often bullied, mocked, and ostracised. This strange behavior was actively encouraged by the manufacturers, as well.

It was to the point that people went into debt to purchase expensive communicators they could not really afford.

'Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous!'

It seemed that even living in the apocalypse had its advantages!

When his battered communicator finally gained enough charge, Sunny dialed Effie. She answered almost immediately, her voice sounding a little grumpy:

"Where the hell have you been? I couldn't reach you."

Sunny coughed in embarrassment.

"Oh, that. I was with Saint. My communicator… might have been

powered down."

'What a… wait a minute.'

Sunny paled.

'I was alone with Saint… my communicator was turned off… oh, no!'

It took a Cursed Terror and being banished from fate to make Effie stop joking about Saint being his girlfriend. And he just gave her ammunition to start that damned joke again!

Sunny hurriedly spoke into the communicator, hoping to interrupt and confuse Effie before she could say anything:

"Anyway! How did your press conference go? Were the journalists very annoying? What about the Captain? Was he pleased? Did the PR department shower you with praise? They did, didn't they?!"

Effie remained silent for a few moments, then said in a strangely somber tone:

"I get it you didn't watch my press conference, then."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"No… why, what happened?"

It was then that he finally registered the noises in the background — the sounds of dozens of people talking, phones ringing, and the Captain berating someone at the top of his lungs.

Effie sighed.

"Go check the news. Then come back here. We… might have a problem."

With that, she ended the call.

Sunny frowned, then accessed the local version of the network and opened the news feed.

Immediately, his expression darkened.

"What?"

Pretty much every news article on the first few pages all showed the same picture: a road littered with broken glass and debris, with a wide gap in the bent and torn metal railing on its side and blood smeared on the wet asphalt.

The titles were all sensational, but said the same thing…

"Breaking news! The Valor Group CEO rushed to the hospital after a failed assassination attempt!"

Sunny threw the communicator down and grabbed the wheel.

'Curse it all… what now?!'

Chapter-2477: Nothing Ventured

The Mirage City Police Department was boiling. By the time Sunny arrived, the Homicide Division Captain wasn't screaming at his subordinates anymore — instead, he was being screamed at by someone higher up the chain. The same was probably happening in other Divisions, even if there was no real point. People just wanted to be seen being indignant to prove their loyalty.

It seemed that an attempt on Mordret's life was at least a hundred times more important than the Nihilist and his seven victims. As if the whole Mirage City revolved around one person.

Looking around with a frown, Sunny ignored the mayhem and found Effie. She was leaning on the wall in the staff kitchen of the Homicide Division, munching on a flamboyant circle-shaped pastry with pink frosting and rainbow-colored sprinkles. There was a large, empty box in front of her, as well.

"Oh, partner! Listen… I discovered these things called donuts. They are simply to die for!"

He gave her a long stare, then gritted his teeth.

"Yeah? Well, if they are so delicious… did you not think to leave one for me, huh?"

She blinked a couple of times, then hurriedly swallowed the rest of her donut and grinned.

"Oops. Sorry. There's none left!"

Sunny shook his head.

"Anyway, is that important right now? What exactly happened to Mordret?"

Effie wiped her hands on a paper towel, then tossed it into the trash bin and shrugged.

"Someone tried to kill him, that's what. Even worse… it happened during my press conference, so all the journalists just whipped out their communicators and ignored me completely. My very own debut! It was completely ruined..."

She gave him a sorrowful look.

"Apparently, Mordret's PTV was crossing a bridge when a truck swerved from the oncoming lane and rammed it at full speed. Both vehicles fell into the river… the collision seemed premeditated, too. The driver died on the spot, Mordret's chauffeur is in critical condition. The man himself escaped with only minor injuries, though."

She shook her head and sighed.

"His PTV was built like a tank, apparently, with an entire arsenal of airbags — I am guessing that is why it was pushed into the water. He managed to swim to shore, though. Not only that, he even stayed behind at first to rescue his driver from the wreckage and dragged the unconscious guy to shore with him. Real heroic stuff... I'm sure the news articles will be colorful tomorrow."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Mordret? Doing something selfless?

"What's the truck driver's identity?"

Effie shrugged.

"Just a random nobody with no apparent connection to Mordret. No score to settle with the Valor Group, either. Lots of gambling debts, though."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"I am guessing we won't be able to see Mordret in the hospital, will we?"

Effie scoffed.

"Not a chance. In any case, sorry that I did not show up. As soon as the news broke, it was all hands on deck here — I couldn't leave without drawing suspicion. How did the date with your therapist go?"

Sunny gave her a wistful look.

"It went terribly… wait, no! It wasn't a date. Don't you dare start that crap again!"

He paused for a moment, and then added somberly:

"She threatened to break my arm and end my career if I ever showed up in front of her again. So… not what you'd call a success."

Effie glanced at the empty box of donuts with regret, sighed, and looked at him with an uncertain expression.

"Anyway… I don't like it. There is a lot going on, but things aren't clicking into place. Mordret, the Nihilist, and the victims — there is nothing that really connects them. And who would want to kill Mordret here? Apart from Morgan, who has been locked up in a mental asylum this whole time."

She shook her head.

"Either we are missing something, or there is a third party involved. Someone we are not aware of."

Sunny remained silent for a while, contemplating her words.

'Who would want to kill Mordret?'

A hint of a sudden suspicion ignited in his mind.

He lingered for a moment, then said quietly:

"Any number of people would want to kill the CEO of the Valor

Group. Who would want to kill Mordret, though? That is a far better question."

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"Have you figured out something?"

Sunny remembered the makeshift investigation board hidden at the back of the Devil Detective's closet. The map of the city, the details of the case, the photos of the victims…

The ghastly, bloated face of the young man they had found on the river shore flashed in his mind.

"Maybe. But… let's discuss it somewhere else. I don't think the Captain will notice if we slip away in the chaos."

The two of them left the police building and drove to Sunny's shabby apartment in silence. On the way, he kept thinking, his frown growing deeper and deeper.

Effie must have sensed his strange mood, because she did not even joke about being invited into a strange man's home when they arrived.

Entering the apartment, Sunny went directly to the closet and opened it, revealing the investigation board. He took out the case file of the recent murder and pinned the photo of the latest victim alongside the others, then took a step back and studied them all once again.

A handsome young man in an unassuming black suit, the tip of a black tattoo barely visible above his collar. A woman with a weathered face wearing cheap clothes. A hunched old man with a neatly trimmed beard. A broad-shouldered man with a chiseled face and muscular figure. A young woman wearing hospital scrubs… and a couple of others.

'I've seen them before.'

There seemed to be nothing common between them. Their age, gender, professions, social status, and physical profile were all different — as if the Nihilist did not care who he killed at all.

There was no apparent pattern in the places where the bodies were found, either. It was all maddeningly random.

"What do you see?"

Effie studied the investigation board, then shrugged.

"A lot of red strings? Most of the bodies were found near water, but that is probably just a coincidence. Mirage City is full of rivers, not to mention the two lakes. Plus, this damn rain has not stopped for weeks."

Sunny winced.

"The victims. Don't they remind you of something?"

Effie frowned.

"Well… come to think of it, they do look familiar. But that is probably because my counterpart saw the news reports when they were killed."

Sunny shook his head.

"No. They look familiar to you, not to your counterpart. It took me a while to remember, but when you asked who would want to kill Mordret, I finally did."

He pursed his lips.

"I guess my thinking has been tainted by the lingering feelings of the Devil Detective, who was convinced that Mordret was the killer. That is why it took me so long to connect the dots."

Effie blinked a few times.

"So, you don't think that Mordret is the killer anymore?"

Sunny slowly shook his head, then pointed at one of the photos — the one of the broad-shouldered, athletic man.

"This guy. He was a lawyer here in Mirage City, but in the real world,

his name was Awakened Warren. He was a retainer of Clan Valor… before Mordret took him as a vessel."

Effie frowned, then looked at the photos once again. Then, her eyes widened slightly.

She recognized them.

The two of them had seen these people before. It had happened in the Third Nightmare… when Mordret had taken them into his nascent Mirror Realm.

Where his morbid wardrobe of stolen bodies was stored.

"These are… Mordret's vessels."

Sunny nodded.

"They are. Nothing connects these people in Mirage City, but actually, they all shared the same fate in the real world. They became Mordret's vessels. So, you see… Mordret is not the killer."

He sighed, then closed his eyes for a moment.

"He is the victim."

The Nihilist... was hunting Mordret down.

Chapter-2478: Nothing Gained

Hearing Sunny call Mordret the victim, Effie let out a short laugh. Then, her expression grew serious.

"That sounds like a bit of divine justice… quite amusing to imagine, really. But we both know that the gods are dead, and there is no justice in the world unless we dispense it ourselves. In any case, this is not particularly good news for us, is it?"

She shook her head.

"We seem to have discovered an important piece of the puzzle… but really, we know even less now than we did this morning. We at least had a suspect before — but if Mordret is not the Nihilist and is instead being hunted by the Nihilist, then we don't even have a suspect. We have nothing at all."

She sighed and rubbed her face tiredly.

"Listen… what was our plan again? Get to Mordret, get control of the Component back from him, find what you are looking for, and return to Bastion. We've met Mordret and gained nothing. Now with this new revelation, it does not even seem like he is the one who stole my administrator rights. So what do we do? How are we getting back to the real world, Sunny?"

He remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Nothing changed. We've met Mordret, but we did not really get to him, did we? Now that we know that his life is in danger, we can apply pressure and get closer. Plus, there is also Saint and Morgan — we have not even reached them yet, so it is too early to draw conclusions. We are supposed to play the roles of detectives, so think like a detective, Effie. We will be patient, slowly build the case, and solve the mystery. That is how we are going to get back."

Sunny studied her expression, then raised an eyebrow.

"But why are you hesitating all of a sudden? I know you well enough to know that you would not have been shaken by something as trivial as a temporary lack of progress. Serial killers, corrupt authorities, unseen dangers… none of that sounds like something that would rattle you. So what is going on?"

Effie met his gaze silently, then grimaced and looked away.

"...Every evening, I have to go home to an unfamiliar husband and take care of unfamiliar kids. That is what is going on."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"That… that's it? You are scared of the creepy Other who plays the role of your husband?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No. It's the children."

Effie looked Sunny in the eye.

"I'm afraid... that I will grow to love them. If we spend too much time here, I will."

She smiled faintly and shook her head again.

"You probably won't understand, but that frightens me far more than serial killers and unseen dangers ever could. We can leave, but what will happen to them when we leave? It is foolish, I know. They aren't even real children. But the longer we stay here, the harder it is to make that distinction."

Sunny stared at Effie, surprised.

She was right, he did not understand… but he did as well, in a way.

Sunny could not really comprehend why she would be so vulnerable to her counterpart's children, in particular, but he knew how impossible it was not to treat phantoms as real people.

Every time Sunny entered a Nightmare, he reminded himself that the people populating them were not real. And every time, he failed to treat them as anything but.

Auro of the Nine, Elyas, Solvane, Noctis, Ananke, Wind Flower, even that brat Cronos… they took more space in his heart than most actual people did, even if he knew that they had been conjured by the Spell.

Sunny sighed.

"I understand. But…"

Before he could finish, though, his communicator exploded with an angry ringing. He frowned, then retrieved it from his pocket and glanced at the screen.

'Damn it.'

Accepting the call, Sunny brought the communicator to his ear… then winced and moved it a few centimeters away when a familiar voice thundered out of the speaker.

"Where the hell are you, bastard?!"

Sunny closed his eyes in exasperation.

"I was going over some materials of the Nihilist case with Detective Athena at a secondary location, Captain… sir."

The Captain's voice sounded almost apoplectic.

"The Nihilist case?! What Nihilist case, you imbecile?! Does that damn Nihilist matter now, damn it?!"

Sunny exhaled slowly.

"With all due respect, sir, it matters just as much as it mattered before some conglomerate heir took a dive from a bridge…"

The torrent of expletives that poured out of the communicator made him wince again.

After about a minute, the Captain's ire finally exhausted itself. He breathed heavily into his communicator, then said hoarsely:

"Listen here, you foul gremlin… get your ass to the headquarters immediately. Put on a siren and run every damn red light on your way here if you need to. And take Athena with you!"

The man paused for a moment, then added in an angry voice:

"And don't you dare corrupt her with your vile influence, you hear me?! Unlike you, deadbeat, she's a promising young detective!"

Sunny's eyes widened in outrage.

'W—what did he say? Me? Corrupt her? That obscene heap of delinquency?! Who will corrupt whom?!'

He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, then said evenly:

"I hear you loud and clear, Captain. But, sir… why do you even need us to come? I'd think that you would want to keep me as far away from that Valor guy's case as possible."

His supposed boss remained silent for a while, then cursed quietly.

"You'd be goddamn right! If it were up to me, your pale mug would have gotten nowhere near this case. But… it's not up to me. Congratulations, I guess!"

Sunny and Effie looked at each other.

"What do you mean, sir?"

The Captain let out a frustrated sigh.

"Mr. Mordret personally requested you… he asked for you by name. So, here we are!"

He paused, and then added tiredly:

"This investigation… has been assigned exclusively to you two. So move your asses!"

Sunny looked at Effie with wide eyes.

She seemed quite surprised, too.

It seemed like they were going to see Mordret again much sooner than they had anticipated.

Chapter-2479: Valiant CEO

Some time before that, Mordret, the CEO of the Valor Group, was left alone in his office after the two detectives left... or rather, he was left in the company of his vast entourage — a person of his status was never really alone, which suited him fine.

Mordret remained seated in his chair for a while, moving his finger across the handrest absent-mindedly.

His executive assistant bowed deeply.

"I am extremely sorry, sir. This will never happen again."

The head of his security bowed, too.

"I will contact the responsible parties immediately. These nobodies will be thrown out of the Police Department by tomorrow… since it was my negligence that allowed them to disturb you, I will accept any punishment with gratitude."

Mordret remained silent for a while, his gaze distant, then looked at them with surprise.

"What? No, don't do anything. Why would we want to be rid of these valiant detectives? I actually... find them quite admirable."

The man, Sunless, was known as the Devil Detective. He was an ace of Mirage PD and somewhat of an unsung hero — a rare officer who was both competent and incorruptible, even if that seemed to have taken a toll on him. Mordret was more than aware of his stellar track record, as well as of his peculiar personality.

The woman, meanwhile…

Reminiscing about his youth, Mordret smiled fondly.

Who knew that he would meet the star athlete, Athena, one day? And she was a detective now! As a young man, he had been a huge fan of hers… he might have even developed a small crush, which earned him a disproportionate amount of teasing from Morgan.

At the thought of his sister, his smile dimmed a little.

Mordret sighed.

"You know, I had a bit of a lonely childhood. But there was this stack of old detective stories in my grandfather's attic… I was probably too young to be reading them, but who was going to stop me? Those books kept me company, and what an exciting company it was! I have had a soft spot for detectives ever since."

Shaking his head, he looked at his assistant.

"Anyway, leave them alone. What is on my schedule? I imagine that the board meeting had to be moved because of this unexpected delay."

The assistant, who had been bowing this whole time, finally straightened.

"The board is waiting, sir — as they should. The chairman is quite impatient, as you know, but he does not dare complain. The issues on the agenda for today's meeting are as follows: budget allocation for the R&D activities in the next quarter, preliminary discussion of the government contracts regarding repair and restoration after the forecasted flood damage, issues concerning the increased financing of our charitable initiatives…"

Mordret listened silently, then nodded.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, then… wait. Repairs after the forecasted flood damage?"

The assistant nodded.

"Yes, sir."

Mordret looked at him with a confused expression.

"What about preventative measures? Why is there nothing on the agenda regarding that?"

The assistant shifted uncomfortably, then said in a flat tone:

"Well… it's because there's little to no money to be made in prevention, sir. Naturally."

Mordret closed his eyes for a moment.

"Naturally, huh?"

Rising from his seat, he gave his assistant a somber glance and headed for the door.

"I guess I'll be making changes to today's agenda then, after all."

***

The day passed in the usual busy work. Late in the evening, Mordret was driven home in his luxurious car. Sitting in the leather seat, he looked at the vistas of Mirage City floating by with a distant expression on his face. His assistant continued to report something from the front, but he did not seem to be listening.

One would think that a man of nearly endless wealth and status would be out enjoying the infinite pleasures life had to offer in his free time, but actually, Mordret led an almost monastic life. His days were usually spent between the offices of the Valor Group and his manor, and what little free time he had was spent with family.

He had been different in his youth, but for many years now, Mordret focused solely on these two things — family and work. Despite being surrounded by countless people every day, he was a solitary person. Nobody really knew what was going on in his head, and what emotions hid behind his perfectly pleasant and mild-mannered facade.

"Sir?"

Mordret looked away from the window, shaken awake from his reverie.

"Yes?"

His assistant handed him a document.

"This is the flood prevention plan you requested. It is a preliminary report, but Valor Construction has been quite efficient in compiling a list of possible measures…"

The car flew through the rain, eventually reaching the shores of the Mirror Lake. From here, one could see the proud walls of the historic castle that served as the most recognizable landmark of Mirage City. Valor Manor was situated on the shore of the lake, surrounded by several acres of old woods.

The family butler, Sebastian, met Mordret at the door and bowed with his usual refined elegance.

"Welcome home, Young Master."

Mordret smiled at the aging man and walked inside.

Once there, he looked around with a subtly lost expression on his face.

The manor… felt terribly empty as of late.

His grandfather had long moved to one of their vacation homes in the countryside. His parents were away on one of their trips. Morgan… Morgan was temporarily away, as well.

Mordret was faced with an empty silence for the first time in a long while.

He stopped near a family portrait hanging above the fireplace in the main foyer and studied it for a while. His assistant, who had followed him inside, finished the report and bowed.

"If there is nothing else, I will depart now, sir. Please have a good rest."

Mordret nodded slowly, letting the man go, but then stopped him suddenly.

"Wait."

The assistant looked back.

"Yes, sir?"

Mordret hesitated for a few moments.

"In the morning… the detectives mentioned a blood sample found on the crime scene. Was my blood really found there?"

His assistant frowned.

"I can check the veracity of their claims if you want, sir. However, I don't see why they would lie about such a thing."

Mordret remained silent for a moment.

"...Who ordered to suppress the investigation, then?"

The man blinked a few times. It seemed that he had been anticipating a different question — who was behind planting the blood sample on the crime scene, for example.

He looked down.

"I assume that it was the chairman of the board, sir."

Mordret pursed his lips.

"The chairman again, huh?"

Soon enough, he was left alone in front of the family portrait.

Mordret stared at it for a long time, his expression slowly growing more and more troubled.

Eventually, he whispered:

"Are you still there? Have you come back?"

Of course, there was no answer.

Turning away from the portrait, Mordret quietly walked away.

Chapter-2480: Alter Ego

In the morning, Mordret informed Sebastian that there would be a change of plans. He was supposed to go straight to the office, but instead, he decided to visit Morgan.

"Master and Madam informed me that they would be returning to Mirage City post haste, Young Master. We should be expecting them in a matter of days."

Mordret smiled.

"Finally, some good news!"

The driver had the car ready by the time he left the manor. The man hurriedly opened an umbrella to escort Mordret to the luxurious vehicle, then pulled open the door and looked down.

Mordret patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll be spending several hours with Morgan. No need to wait — treat yourself to something warm and delicious on the company bill. Just make sure to come pick me up at noon."

His driver had been serving the family for more than a decade now, and used to drive Mordret to and from the university. Hearing that he would have some free time today, he smiled.

"Thank you, sir."

As the car drove toward the distant clinic where Morgan was being treated, Mordret suddenly remembered the detectives from the day before.

They were an amusing pair. The man was of a modest stature and deathly pale, rough around the edges, while the woman was tall with

olive skin, soft and maternal despite her flawlessly athletic figure. By all accounts, they were complete opposites — almost like a pair of mismatched partners straight from the pages of the detective stories he once loved to read.

But that was not why Mordret was suddenly reminded of them.

'Snap out of it… was that what Detective Athena said?'

Strange words, not at all suitable for the occasion.

He could almost feel the heat of her touch on his shoulder, still…

A fantastical suspicion entered Mordret's mind, and a subtle crease appeared on his brow.

Just then, the car drove onto the wide bridge. One escort vehicle was in front of it, while another was behind — the rain was so intense that they could barely be seen, and the headlights of the cars in the oncoming lane fused into a blur.

Mordret was deep in thought, a complicated expression twisting the fine lines of his face.

It was then that something on the periphery of his vision attracted his attention.

Looking up, he just barely had time to notice a ramshackle truck in the oncoming lane taking a sharp turn.

Then, everything happened too fast to react.

The truck caught the rear bumper of the escort vehicle, throwing the car aside in an explosion of debris. Then, it rammed the luxury car behind it at full speed.

Mordret would have been thrown against the wall of the leather-bound interior if not for the airbags that instantly deployed. Still, he received a vicious shaking and was completely disoriented because of the blow.

The seat belt dug into his chest, suffocating him.

Dazed, Mordret heard an ear-piercing scratching sound and felt the car moving sideways. Then, there was another impact…

And he could suddenly feel his body growing light.

The car was falling.

'The river…'

Before Mordret could finally realize what was happening, there was a third impact, this one the most violent. The deflated airbags still protected him, but then, he felt water streaming across his legs.

Shaking off his disorientation, Mordret looked around.

It only took him a split second to assess the situation.

The car was severely damaged, its windows broken, and sinking into the swollen river. The water was already inside the cabin, rising swiftly at a steep angle.

He was hopelessly entangled in the seat belt and imprisoned in a soft cage of airbags, moments away from being submerged into the cold darkness.

'Ah…'

Mordret tugged on the seat belt, but instead of releasing him, it seemed completely stuck in place.

Well, of course it was… seat belts were designed to resist sudden jerking motions.

The icy-cold water covered his head, and he suddenly couldn't breathe.

Remaining calm, Mordret pulled on the seat belt slowly, loosened its grip, then ducked under and freed himself. Then, he disentangled himself from the airbags and looked through the murky water at the broken window on the opposite side of the car's interior.

His lungs were already starting to burn.

But salvation was so close… all he had to do was climb through the window, then swim to the surface.

Mordret was prepared to do just that when his gaze fell on the unconscious form in the driver's seat.

He remained motionless for a moment, then moved in the opposite direction from the broken window and pushed himself through the narrow opening between the passenger compartment and the driver's cabin.

The car was sinking swiftly, and it was already terribly dark around. The driver's side had received the most damage in the collision and was completely deformed, as well. Suffering from the lack of oxygen, Mordret felt around for the release of the driver's seat belt and tried to disengage it. However, no matter how he tried, the bent clasp refused to let go.

He was already suffocating by then.

Gritting his teeth, Mordret twisted the clasp and pressed the release button with all his strength. Finally, the seat belt slipped from the locking mechanism, allowing him to grab his driver and drag them both to the broken windshield.

'Ah… this… is harder than it looks in movies…'

Mordret followed a relatively rigorous athletic regimen, and he was especially fond of swimming — however, the stylish clothes he was so fond of were now weighing him down like cinderblocks, pulling him deeper into the water. More than that, the weight of his driver's unconscious body was simply unbearable.

He was already struggling to push his own through the cold mass of dark, restless water — dragging another man along was simply too strenuous, too difficult.

And his lungs were on fire. His lungs begged for oxygen, and a panicked terror was flooding his mind, demanding that he let go of his heavy burden and save himself.

But Mordret refused.

Instead, he fought against the water with all the strength he could muster, even if his vision was already starting to darken.

Then, finally…

His head broke through the surface of the water, and Mordret drew in a feverish breath.

The shore seemed terribly far, but he managed to reach it, somehow, after all.

Dragging himself and the driver onto the ground, Mordret fell down, utterly spent.

He was so cold.

Taking several hoarse breaths, he pushed himself off the ground and bent over the driver.

"Hey… hey, are you…"

Was he dead?

Paralyzed by fear, Mordret lightly slapped the man across the cheek.

To his great relief, the driver groaned, coughed out a mouthful of water, and slowly opened his eyes.

Mordret let out a relieved sigh.

"Thank the gods!"

But then… something about the driver felt off.

His eyes grew strangely glassy, full of something unfamiliar and cold.

In the next moment, the man's gloved hand closed around Mordret's neck.

'What…'

Suddenly ferociously... inhumanly... strong, the driver strangled Mordret while pulling him down to the ground and climbing atop of

him.

Wide-eyed, Mordret tried to pry the man's hands off his neck, but it was of no use. It was as if his neck was being squeezed by an iron vice, moments away from snapping.

Even if his neck somehow survived, he would be strangled to death before too long.

'What is…'

As he struggled desperately, hopelessly, Mordret's vision started to darken for the second time today. The driver's eerie, glassy eyes were the only thing he saw.

'N—no...'

It was then that a shadow suddenly covered them, and something cold flashed in the air.

Hot blood splattered across Mordret's face, and he suddenly could breathe again.

Pushing the driver away, he climbed back and saw a slender figure leaning over the crazed man. A sharp knife flashed again, plunging into the driver's flesh once more. More blood spilled onto the wet ground.

The figure twisted the knife, then coldly kicked the man in the wounded side, throwing him back into the water.

"W—who…"

The knife-wielding stranger was standing with his back to Mordret, wearing a cheap, ragged raincoat and an unassuming cap. Countered against the grey sky and the dark line of the distant bridge, his tall figure seemed both threatening and strangely familiar.

Finally, the stranger turned around and looked down at Mordret, his cold gaze full of irritation and contempt.

Mordret flinched as he saw the stranger's face.

…His own face.

As the stranger leaned down, blood still dripping from his hands, Mordret remained frozen in place. His reflection was pale and shocked in the other Mordret's mirror-like eyes.

The other's face split into a pleasant smile, and he whispered into Mordret's ear, his insidious voice full of barely contained hatred:

"Hey, wastrel… can't you even keep yourself alive? You weak, worthless fool. Do I have to do everything for you?"

The tip of the knife bit vindictively into Mordret's cheek, leaving a shallow cut on it.

There were shouts and the sound of sirens in the distance.

…By the time he could finally move, the other was already gone, as if he had never existed.

Raising a shaking hand, Mordret touched his cheek.

His hand came down bloody.

Looking at the blood smeared across his fingers...

Mordret suddenly smiled brightly.

"He's back!"

Chapter-2481: Broken Mirror

As they drove to the hospital, both Sunny and Effie were alternating between feeling wary and confused.

The roads were congested because of the rain — the failing storm drains were spouting foaming torrents of water here and there, causing some outermost lanes to be entirely flooded. Taller PTVs barreled their way through the puddles, but smaller vehicles had to huddle to the middle of the road, crawling slowly. Sunny's rust bucket was, sadly, one of the latter.

'My Rhino… would never…'

Sunny sighed.

At that moment, Effie finally spoke:

"Why would he want us to handle his case?"

Her voice was full of suspicion.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then shrugged.

"That depends. Does he really not remember anything, or were we fooled? Either way, we'll find out when we get there."

Effie grimaced.

"Listen, partner, you probably don't know that guy well. But I had the misfortune of conquering two Nightmares with him… so believe me when I tell you, he is a demon. And not in a cool, sexy way — more so in the creepy, there is something deeply wrong with this bastard way."

She paused for a moment, then added somberly:

"First of all, as you might know already, he is immortal. The Great Clan Valor and his own father went out of their way to find a way to kill him, but they failed. All they could do was turn a Citadel on the Chained Isles into an inescapable prison to contain him, complete with a Transendent warden and a hundred Lost guards. But he still escaped, massacring everyone in that Citadel in the process — Cassie was the only one who survived."

Sunny smiled sadly, but did not say anything.

Effie looked at him with a dark expression.

"In the Second Nightmare, he slaughtered an entire kingdom. Then, he played Song and Valor against each other and provoked the Battle of the Black Skull — if not for his machinations, Whispering Blade and gods know how many more people would have still been alive. We saw a Defiled version of his Transcendent self consume literally millions of people in the Tomb of Ariel… that thing was not an abomination. It was an entire nation, in and of itself."

A bitter smile appeared on her lips.

"And while he did not swallow millions of people in the real world, he did devour and take out an entire Great Clan all by himself. Not only that, but by doing so, he completely changed the course of the war between the Sovereigns, giving Ki Song a chance to win. He would have conquered the entire Sword Domain, too — without an army, all by himself — if not for the trick Morgan and Jet pulled off in Bastion."

She sighed and shook her head.

"Even then, technically, he accomplished what he wanted to accomplish there by stealing a Great Citadel from Anvil without even setting foot in it. And without that Cursed Demon you somehow lulled to sleep and delivered to me, who knows what would have happened? In any case, the very fact that a Cursed Demon was needed to handle a mere Saint says everything one needs to know about Mordret of Nowhere, already. What I mean to say is… he might not have taken the last step to Supremacy like the two of you did, but he did just about everything but."

Effie scowled.

"That guy is not right in the head, not right at all. You looked into that guy's eyes, so you should know — something is amiss there. I don't know what he is missing, but whatever it is, it's the thing that makes us humans... human."

Sunny looked at her with a subtle frown, contemplating.

'Something is missing...'

Effie's words had reminded him of his own old impression of the Prince of Nothing, and something about it all suddenly seemed to hide an elusive meaning.

A completely bizarre idea was slowly forming in his mind. It seemed a little too strange to be true… but also a little too fitting to simply discard it.

'That is... impossible, right?'

He lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"Did you get the same impression when you looked our CEO friend in the eye?"

Effie raised an eyebrow, thought about it, and then slowly shook her head.

"Sort of? Not really. At least not in the same way."

Sunny exhaled slowly.

He would have never suspected something like that before meeting Mordret here in Mirage City, but now, an entirely new possibility suddenly emerged out of nowhere, making him question everything.

"Do you remember what Mordret said in the Third Nightmare?"

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"What, you even know about that? Wow. I have not imagined that

Neph's pillow talk includes talking about Mordret…"

Sunny gave her a glare.

"Yes, I do know. And why the hell are you imagining our pillow talk at all?"

Effie laughed.

"Anyway, Mordret said a lot of things in the Third Nightmare. What do you mean in particular?"

Sunny turned the wheel to change lanes and avoid a puddle that seemed deep enough to flood the weird explosion engine of his car.

"His — and Soul Stealer's — Flaw. He said that he did not bring his Flaw along into the Nightmare, because carrying something that dangerous around would have been foolish."

Effie raised an eyebrow, then nodded.

"Oh, that? Sure, I remember. You don't hear something like that every day, after all."

Sunny frowned.

"I always assumed that he was either lying or talking about a thing. You know, like in the fairy tales where an evil being separates their death from themselves to become immortal, then hides it in the guise of some mundane item. Like a needle or some such — so, they could only be killed by that needle. But what if Mordret was not talking about a thing? What if…"

He fell silent for a few moments, then asked in a hesitant tone:

"What if he meant a person?"

Effie opened her eyes wide and stared at him with a confused expression.

"Wait, are you saying that Mordret's Flaw… is a person?"

She blinked a few times.

"No, wait. You're not just saying that it's a person. You're saying that it's the CEO of the Valor Group. There are… two of that bastard?!"

One Prince of Nothing was already one too many. Two of them walking around at the same time... sounded certifiably dreadful.

'But it fits, doesn't it? Damnation!'

Sunny did not respond immediately, choosing to keep quiet. Eventually, though, he had to answer.

"Well, I don't know. But Mordret always had a strange relationship with mirrors and reflections. What if his Flaw is actually his reflection?"

He paused for a moment, feeling a chill run down his spine.

Something else suddenly occurred to him.

'Damn.'

"Actually, we don't know which one of them is real. What if the Mordret we know is the reflection, instead?"

Mordret had conquered his First Nightmare at twelve. So, he had gained his Flaw at twelve, as well.

If he had really been broken in two and there were two halves of him walking around the world…

Then one of them had been scorned by the Great Clan Valor, imprisoned for seven long years, then escaped his cage and became the Prince of Nothing they knew.

While the other…

The other would have spent close to two decades in the beautiful fantasy created for him by the Great Mirror of the Demon of Imagination. In a place that revolved entirely around him, where all his wishes would have come true...

In Mirage City.

Chapter-2482: Inside Job

By the time they arrived at the hospital, the rain seemed to have become even heavier. Sunny and Effie jogged from the parking lot to the entrance, where groups of workers in yellow raincoats were busy building sandbag barricades around the building. The same was happening in many parts of the city after a flooding warning was issued earlier in the morning, with a small army of volunteers mobilized by the Valor Group.

Before diving into the dry safety of the hospital's lobby, Sunny looked up at the stormy expanse of the grey sky.

The heavy sky looked like it would split open at any moment now.

'Ah… I hate water…'

Shaking his head, he followed Effie inside.

It did not take them long to arrive at the VIP ward where Mordret was being treated. The ward — if it could even be called that — resembled a presidential suite in a luxury hotel more than it resembled a patient room. It was definitely much larger than Sunny's entire apartment, furnished with a degree of lavishness few people could ever dream of, let alone experience.

The man himself was in the process of putting on another immaculately tailored, stylish suit while discussing something with one of his plentiful assistants. There was a small piece of adhesive bandage on Mordret's cheek, as well as a few bruises marring his smooth skin here and there — but other than that, he did not look like someone who had just barely survived a deadly vehicle collision.

In fact, he looked strangely cheerful.

"Ah, detectives!"

Noticing them, Mordret smiled.

"You are just in time. I am about to be discharged… would you mind following me to the office? We can talk in the car."

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other, then studied the battered CEO of the Valor Group intently.

They might have remained silent for a few moments longer than necessary.

"Ah… yes. No problem."

Mordret beamed.

"Wonderful! Then, shall we depart?"

'What the hell is wrong with him?'

The CEO of the Valor Group did not feel like the Mordret Sunny knew at all. He was too soft, trusting, and... nice. However, he did not seem exactly normal, either.

Why was he so happy? Even if he had not sustained heavy injuries in the assassination attempt, it was still a traumatic experience. If Sunny was right and this version of Mordret had spent most of his life in Mirage City, then he should not have experienced many brushes with death, let alone with murder and violence.

People like that did not usually brim with positive energy after surviving an attempt on their life.

'Maybe he's just happy to be alive?'

They followed Mordret back the way they came. As they did, Sunny asked the question that had been tormenting him for the last couple of hours:

"Excuse me, Mr. Mordret, but may I ask why you requested my partner and me to be assigned to your case?"

Mordret glanced at him with a smile.

"Why? Well… I guess you've made an impression?"

Sunny shook his head.

"You should know that you are a suspect in another case we are investigating. Needless to say, there is somewhat of a conflict of interest… not to mention that a person of your status would usually feel offended by two detectives interrogating them. Considering the vast resources at your disposal, we are not exactly the best choice, are we?"

Mordret looked at him with a hint of amusement in his strange mirror-like eyes.

"On the contrary, Detective. That makes you the best choice."

Effie chuckled.

"How do you mean?"

As they entered the elevator, Mordret gave his entourage a nod to stay behind. With only the three of them in the cabin, he said calmly:

"It is not easy to assassinate someone like me. My security is quite thorough… and yet, someone ambushed my car on the bridge. At the very least, they had to have known the route I was taking, as well as my destination. Which means that my schedule had been leaked. More than that, I changed it on a whim just that morning. So, whoever leaked my schedule has to be quite close to me — a person in my inner circle, most likely."

He paused for a moment, then sighed.

"And while I don't want to brag, I have to point out that the Valor Group has no competitors. We are too vast and powerful to have enemies… so, there is a high chance that this assassination was ordered by someone within the company. You have already demonstrated your willingness to ignore the pressure exerted by the higher-ups of the Valor Group — very few people would. So, you see, that makes you two the best candidates to investigate this case."

Sunny stared at Mordret with a strange expression.

The young CEO was making a lot of sense… but there also seemed to be something off about his logic.

Investigating the assassination attempt would give Sunny easy access to Mordret and the inner workings of the Valor Group, though, so he was not going to refuse… not that the Captain had given them an option to refuse.

"So, basically, what you are saying is that we are the only two cops in Mirage City that you know for a fact can't be bought?"

Mordret coughed.

"I… wouldn't personally put it quite that way. I am sure there are countless honest and trustworthy people in the Mirage City Police Department. It is just that I do not know them personally."

Sunny nodded.

"If you say so."

They arrived at the lobby of the hospital, where another part of Mordret's entourage was already waiting. Three umbrellas were opened to protect him, Sunny, and Effie from the rain, and they were led to a luxurious PTV in a private parking lot — different from the one destroyed in the crash, but similarly lavish and stunning.

Mordret turned.

"You must have arrived in a car of your own. I wouldn't want to inconvenience you, so let me ask my driver to… oh."

He froze for a moment, a hint of a mournful expression appearing on his face.

Sunny glanced at the file he had retrieved from the hospital administration before coming to see Mordret.

"I am sorry for your loss. I heard that he passed away in the operating room."

Mordret remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"Yes. I've been told that he did."

His personal assistant took the driver's seat, while Mordret, Sunny, and Effie entered the passenger compartment.

Lowering himself on a soft leather cushion, Sunny looked around with a strange expression.

'What the hell?'

He had assumed that all archaic PTVs were like his pitiful rust bucket.

But Mordet had been moving around in this palace on wheels this whole time?!

No… it was merely his backup palace on wheels.

Sunny blinked a few times.

The ancient times held many secrets…

Chapter-2483: Internal Strife

Sunny studied the luxurious interior of Mordret's opulent PTV, feeling a little… no, he was definitely not envious. Not at all!

'Whatever. There's no mobile command center or essence converter here… bah! There's no bed, even. What a peasant.'

He cleared his throat and opened a notebook.

"So, Mr. Mordret, would you tell us what happened?"

Mordret checked his seat belt, then leaned back and sighed.

An opaque screen rose at a press of a button, separating the passenger compartment from the driver's cabin.

"Well… there is not much to tell, really. That truck suddenly turned, brushed against the escort vehicle, then crashed into my car and continued pushing until we both went through the railing and fell into the river. By the time I came around, water was already streaming inside, and my driver was unconscious. So, I grabbed him and swam to shore."

Sunny pretended to note something with his pen.

"And then what happened?"

Mordret shrugged.

"Then? Nothing, I guess? My security arrived first, then the ambulances. I was taken to the hospital, and here we are."

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other.

He lingered for a moment, then asked in a neutral tone:

"The last time we spoke, you mentioned that your blood could have been planted on the crime scene, and that there are many people who would wish you ill. The next day, there was an attempt on your life. Do things like that happen to you often, Mr. Mordret?"

Mordret shook his head.

"No… this is the first time, actually."

Sunny studied him for a moment.

"Did you not say that your sister tried to harm you?"

Mordret's expression darkened.

"That was an entirely different issue. Morgan was just… confused. She was not herself."

'Not herself…'

Sunny frowned.

"I see. Well, in any case, you indicated that someone inside the Valor Group might be behind the attempt on your life. Do you have anyone particular in mind?"

Mordret shook his head again.

"Not really."

'That's not helpful at all.'

Effie, who had been enthralled by the snacks in the lavishly stocked bar of the PTV, finally joined the conversation — leaning forward a little, she asked with a smile:

"Let us put it that way — who would benefit the most if you were removed from your position? Who would gain the most?"

Mordret remained silent for a few moments before saying in a hesitant tone:

"I guess… it would be the chairman of the board? He and I clash

often regarding various issues. His vision of what the Valor Group is supposed to be is different from mine. And unless my father decides to come back from retirement, he would be the logical choice for the next CEO in case I vanish one day."

Noticing a sharp glint in their eyes, Mordret laughed and raised his hands.

"Oh, but please don't misunderstand. It could not have been him. The chairman… he's my uncle, you see. I know what is being said about us conglomerate families, but we are not like that at all. He would never do anything to hurt me."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Your uncle? Mr. Madoc, I presume?"

Mordret nodded.

"The one and only. He is my father's older brother."

'How… morbid.'

Whispering Blade was dead in the real world, but his reflection was still alive and well in Mirage City. Not only that, but just like his real self, he had lost the battle of succession to his younger brother… and then, to his nephew as well.

The picture practically drew itself. An affluent family, a power-hungry uncle, a conspiracy to steal control of the family business from the young prince…

"Well, Mr. Mordret… you might be sure that your uncle would never conspire against you, but as detectives, we must investigate all possibilities. So, if you don't mind, we would like to interview him — as well as a number of other people in your immediate circle. The staff of your manor, for example."

Mordret nodded.

"By all means. I hope we can get to the bottom of this unfortunate incident. Ah… but it will take some time to arrange all the

interviews. Perhaps we can start tomorrow?"

Sunny and Effie asked a few more questions, slowly drawing the picture of the internal politics of the Valor Group.

They subtly tested Mordret to see who he really was, as well.

Some time later, the PTV arrived at its destination. Mordret smiled apologetically.

"If you'll excuse me now, detectives — I have already been absent for too long, so there's a mountain of paperwork awaiting me. I will ask my… my new driver to drive you back."

He made to leave, then hesitated for a few moments and chuckled.

"Oh… I have a request. If it's not too forward, Detective Athena, may I ask for your autograph?"

He picked up an exquisite round coaster and offered it to her along with a pen that seemed to be more expensive than everything the two detectives owned put together.

His slightly shy smile was quite charming.

"In honor of your famous discus throw that brought Mirage City the golden medal."

Effie took the pen, lingered for a while, then laughed and signed it.

"I can't believe that the CEO of the Valor Group is my fan. How strange… I'll have to tell my husband!"

Taking the coaster, Mordret flashed them another smile.

"Then, if you'll excuse me."

With that, he left.

The ride back was spent in silence. Since the interview with Chairman Madoc and other employees of the Valor Group was scheduled for tomorrow, Sunny and Effie had to do a lot of research

— so, they were buried in their communicators, studying everything there was to study on the network.

The sandbag barricade around the hospital had grown a little taller in their absence. Climbing back into Sunny's car after experiencing the luxury of Mordret's palatial PTV felt like a letdown, but neither of them really cared.

As soon as they were alone, their expressions changed.

Sunny looked at Effie and raised an eyebrow.

"So, what do you think?"

She pulled out the snacks she had pilfered from Mordret's car and smiled darkly.

"He seems nice. I am entirely sure that he is not… our… Mordret."

Sending a handful of honey-glazed almonds into her mouth, Effie chewed them happily and added:

"I am also sure that the bastard is lying."

Chapter-2484: Nature Versus Nurture

Sunny scoffed.

"Well, obviously."

Opening the preliminary autopsy report of Mordret's dead driver, he shook his head.

"The report says that he died from the injuries received in the crash, and Mordret's retelling of the events corroborates that. It is weird, though… I have not heard of vehicle crashes that leave knife wounds behind."

A human body could be torn and broken in all kinds of ways during a high-speed collision, but Sunny had seen countless stab wounds — most of them, he had delivered himself. So, he would never mistake a wound delivered by a sharp blade for anything else.

Even if the driver's body had been pierced by metal debris, the shape of the wounds would have been different. The edges of the cuts would have been different, as well — so, the chances of these ones appearing on the body naturally were close to zero.

Something had happened between the moment the car fell into the water and the moment Mordret and his dying driver were found on the shore of the river.

Which meant that Mordret had lied to them.

Effie nodded.

"Someone killed that man, and Mordret is covering for that someone."

She lingered for a moment, then sighed.

"Also… I think that your theory was true."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Because of that discus thing?"

Effie nodded again.

"Yes. I wasn't sure at first, but after rummaging in my counterpart's memories, it is obvious. That guy might not be the Mordret we know, but he was testing us. She won many medals, but her most famous win was a record-breaking spear throw, not a discus throw. She actually messed up while throwing the latter — she gripped the discus so hard that it cracked and fell apart in the air. It was a pretty lackluster performance."

Sunny frowned.

"He was definitely testing us, but what was he trying to find out?"

Effie looked at him somberly.

"Whether or not I am the real Detective Athena, I presume."

Sunny exhaled slowly.

"Which means that he's aware that someone could have taken her place. Which, in turn… means that he remembers the outside world."

Effie chuckled.

"That is why he did not react in any way when I told him to snap out of it. It was not that my authority had no effect on him — it's just that he had always known the truth, so there was nothing for him to snap out of."

Sunny rubbed his face tiredly.

"There really are two of him. Damna… huh? Wait, you ate all of that, already?"

There was now a pile of empty snack packets on the floor of his car. Sunny's eye twitched.

"And why are you throwing them on the floor?! My PTV might be a scrap heap, but it is not a trash heap! Pick them up immediately!"

Effie coughed a few times, then picked the packets up and rolled them into a ball.

"These morsels were pretty sweet, by the way! Oh… sorry for not leaving you any…"

Sunny glared at her.

"Whatever… I'll forgive you this time. Only a sick lunatic like you would eat something covered in honey, anyway."

He shivered.

Effie laughed.

"How about we go back to that diner and eat something? It's on me, partner."

Sunny scoffed.

"Sure. Spending illusory money to treat me to an illusory meal… how generous of you."

Soon enough, they found themselves in the familiar decrepit diner. The food was just as delicious as it was the previous time, though — neither Sunny nor Effie was in the mood to discuss serious matters at the moment, so they simply enjoyed it in silence.

Eventually, Effie sighed in satisfaction and looked outside.

"What a turn of events, huh? Makes me wonder… if I had an evil twin, what would she be doing?"

She chuckled and shook her head.

"Then again, I did have an evil twin for a while, in the Tomb of Ariel.

She just went around devouring Nightmare Creatures — and people, I guess."

Effie's expression changed.

"Wait, does that make Soul Stealer an evil twin of an evil twin? That's like… double the evil!"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"I am not sure that it's so simple — that there's a nice and evil version of Mordret. Who knows? Maybe if the Mordret we know grew up in the idyllic Mirage City, he would have been nice too. And if the CEO of the Valor Group experienced everything his other version experienced, he would have become a crazy bastard too."

Effie shook her head.

"Nature versus nurture, huh? No… there's definitely something wrong with Mordret — the one from the real world, I mean. He would have been an eerie creep even in Mirage City."

She looked at him with curiosity and asked:

"What about you, partner? If you had an evil twin, what would he have been doing?"

Sunny smiled.

"No idea. Who says that I'm not the evil twin?"

Effie laughed.

"Oh? Have you done a lot of evil things?"

He shrugged.

"Did you think that I became a Sovereign by being kind and good to people? I killed those who could not defend themselves, betrayed those who trusted me, and chose myself at every step of the way. Well, sure, I did a lot of good things too — saving the powerless, standing by my allies, and spilling my own blood for the sake of

others. I guess it all balances out, in the end."

Sunny sighed.

"Nephis and I, we were prepared to sacrifice millions of lives if it meant getting rid of the Sovereigns. Something like that… is exactly the kind of thing I hated the Sovereigns for, you know? So even if I am not evil, I am at least a hypocrite. Oh, coincidentally, hypocrites are what I hate the most."

He laughed at the irony.

"I guess an opposite version of me would have been selfless, kind, and honest… and dead because of it, most likely."

Effie studied him for a while, then shook her head and smiled.

"No, stop pretending. I know you're not evil, Shadow Boy."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Do you? How so?"

She shrugged.

"Well, it was what you told us back when Nephis first brought you along, wasn't it? You said that you knew yourself to be a killer, and that you hoped that all the killing you did changed the world into the shape that allowed better people than you to build things. Even if they had to build them on the ruins left in your wake."

Effie smiled.

"I did not show it then, but I was actually quite touched by that speech. I thought… what a nice guy! Inferior to Master Sunless in all regards, of course, but still a catch!"

She laughed.

"Who knew the two were one and the same? It's like the best of both worlds. Lord of Shadows in the streets, Master Sunless in the…"

Sunny threw a napkin at her.

"Cut it out, damn it…"

Chapter-2485: Hardest Part

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed.

He wanted to drink something with more bite than water… coincidentally, a familiar green palisade of soju bottles was looking at him invitingly from a nearby display, begging to be bought.

He raised an eyebrow.

'Since when do I crave alcohol?'

Sunny had avoided alcohol entirely for many years after the Forgotten Shore. He only allowed himself to enjoy it from time to time now because his Rank made him all but immune to intoxication — so, he could enjoy an occasional glass of wine without suffering the consequences of imbibing it.

But at the moment, as a mundane person, he once again wanted to stay as far away from alcohol as possible. It was just that the Devil Detective's body, it seemed, had its own opinion.

…Maybe he was someone's better twin, after all.

Looking away from the soju bottles, Sunny glanced at Effie.

"Lord of Shadows, Master Sunless… and the rest of me. I'd think that if anyone could understand my double life, it would be you."

She arched her eyebrow.

"Me? I'm an open book, though. How come?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, everyone else is doing just one thing. Nephis, Cassie, Kai, Jet, me… we are all at war, and we live and breathe that war. But

ironically, the War Beast herself — you — is a warrior, a wife, and a mother. Waging war and playing house are two different things, two different lives. Not that there is anything wrong with that, just… seems strange, to me."

Effie stared at him for a few moments, then laughed.

"Gods. Aren't you something… what is wrong with both being a warrior and having a life? I didn't invent it, you know. People have been doing just that since the dawn of time. War, plague, famine, the Spell — nothing has ever managed to stop us humans from forming families and making babies. That is our nature. If anything, it is you guys who are weird."

Sunny scoffed.

"I already said that there is nothing wrong with that."

Effie remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

"I'll admit, though… it's not easy. Being away for long stretches of time is not easy. Not knowing whether I'll get to come back is not easy. Thinking about what will happen if I do not is… hard. Walking out of the door and leaving them behind, though, that's probably the hardest."

She looked out the window.

"To the point that, sometimes, I feel like I am not brave enough to open the door and leave. But I always do."

Effie looked back at Sunny and shrugged with a smile.

"A part of me always stays behind, though. Who cares if it's hard? Life isn't supposed to be easy, anyway. At least it has never been for me. However, it's pretty sweet — sweeter than I ever imagined it could be. I bet you can understand what I mean."

She laughed, and Sunny could not help but smile, too.

Indeed… the life he was living, despite all its hardships, was much sweeter than anything a lonely kid in the outskirts could have ever

imagined.

But it wasn't quite as sweet as he wanted it to be, just yet.

And to take the next step toward achieving his goals, Sunny needed to get to the bottom of Mirage City. He had to catch the Nihilist, learn what Mordret was hiding, recover the fragment of Weaver's Lineage, and escape.

Looking at the watch, Sunny pushed the empty plate away and rose.

"Sweet life, huh? That's you hinting that I should buy dessert, isn't it?"

Effie grinned.

"I mean… if you insist…"

Sunny shook his head.

"Shameless… didn't you say that you'll pay the bill, this time?"

They did end up buying dessert. Not only because Effie's stomach was a bottomless pit, but also because Sunny was curious about the baking arts of the bygone era. From what he had glimpsed so far, ancient cuisine was superior to what he was familiar with not only in terms of ingredient variety, but also in terms of nuance and technique.

The Brilliant Emporium might have closed its doors, but Sunny still hoped to reopen it again, one day. In the meantime, he was determined to perfect his culinary skills.

Some time later, he said goodbye to Effie and drove home. After spending some time in the evening traffic, he ended up back at the Devil Detective's shabby apartment complex. The familiar drunk was once again loitering near the building, but got scared away when Sunny's car pulled up. The heavy curtain of rain veiled the world and suppressed the sounds, making his paranoia act up.

Sunny wondered briefly if it was his own paranoia or the remnant wariness of his counterpart.

Entering the apartment, he shook the water from his jacket and went about taking care of his fragile, weak mundane body. This body needed a lot of things to survive and function properly, and what it needed the most was sleep — the interviews with Mordret's staff were going to start early tomorrow, so Sunny needed to give himself enough time to rest.

Just before climbing into bed, he stopped and stared at the investigation map at the back of the Devil Detective's closet. The shape of the city, the evidence, the victims of the Nihilist — Mordret's former vessels…

Turning away, Sunny turned off the light and lay on the bed. The sound of the rain on the window was like a lullaby, but sleep still escaped him for a long time.

When he finally slipped into its embrace, his dreams were cold and restless, full of mirrors and breaking glass.

The sound of breaking glass…

Sunny opened his eyes abruptly, the sound still ringing in his ears.

'The bottle.'

The bottle that he had balanced on the door handle, following the Devil Detective's paranoid habit, was broken.

Blinded by the darkness, Sunny rolled to the side.

In the next moment, a cold blade hissed as it cut the air, and then plunged into his pillow, missing his head only by a few centimeters.

Chapter-2486: It Belongs in a Museum

Sunny rolled off the bed, cursing his mundane senses.

His reflexes were sharp, and despite the neglect and abuse, his body was in good shape. However, he could not sense the shadows. Even more humiliating, he could not even see in the dark — for the first time in a long while, Sunny was truly blind.

The only light in the room came through a narrow crack between the curtains, and all he could see was a dark shape jumping over the bed.

He could, however, smell wet wool, old sweat, and the stench of alcohol.

'The... the damned drunk!'

He knew it!

Paranoia had never let him down, after all…

Sunny was laying on the floor in an awkward pose, while the attacker was on the bed, a split second away from coming down with the deadly blade in his hand — it was a mundane knife, but here in Mirage City, even a mundane blade had the power to make Sunny bleed.

It had the power to make him die.

His senses were gone, his Aspect was gone… however, his skill and experience were still with him. Sunny did not possess the power of a Sovereign anymore, but he was still the person who had become a Sovereign.

And that was his most frightening quality, by far — a strength far more important than his Aspect, Attributes, and Domain had ever been.

Instead of trying to rise, Sunny kicked the cheap bed with all his might. It slid half a meter back, throwing the moving attacker off balance — the dark silhouette swayed and fell, crashing into the floor.

There was the sound of empty bottles breaking, and glass shards were suddenly everywhere.

Grabbing a curtain, Sunny pulled it down while jumping to his feet. The shoddily attached curtain pole snapped, and the cold light of electric street lights poured into the small apartment.

His pale skin, lean muscles, and the coils of the black serpent tattooed across his body were revealed in that light.

The eerie, glassy eyes of the supposed drunk were revealed, too.

Sunny looked at him with a calm, cold gaze of a seasoned killer.

"You have some nerve, coming after a cop. Who sent you?"

Instead of answering, the drunk lunged forward.

The man looked like a drunk and smelled like a drunk… but he moved with the speed and lethal precision of a trained assassin.

'Assassins, huh? That is a new one…'

There weren't any professional assassins left in the real world. There were consummate slayers proficient in killing quietly, sure, but who had time to specialize in assassinating people when there were hordes of Nightmare Creatures roaming both the Dream Realm and Earth? There was no stable employment in that, so even for those who did do such work, it was merely a part-time job.

Sunny had envisioned himself as one such quiet killer once, though, so he felt a little resentful of the man who had entered his apartment to end his life.

Catching the man's wrist, Sunny turned, isolating the enemy's arm between his own and his torso, then slammed the palm of his other hand into the killer's fist. The knife rattled as it fell on the floor, and he immediately spun, tensing his abdominal muscles — and not a moment too soon.

The assassin's fist crashed into the steel barrier of his muscles, and at the same time, Sunny's elbow caught the man in the side of the head.

Disoriented, the man staggered toward the window and turned, shielding his head with one arm.

The other reached toward his belt and pulled out a strange contraption. It had a short stubby barrel and a revolving cylinder protruding from the middle of its metal frame, with a ring protecting the assassin's index finger, but not the rest of them.

'That's… an ancient gun.'

An average Awakened might not know a lot about firearms, but Sunny had led mundane soldiers across the frigid expanse of Antarctica.

He had also grown up in the outskirts, so he knew a gun when he saw one, even if it was an archaic relic that belonged in a museum.

Sunny looked at the killer with a dark expression.

'Who brings a gun to a fistfight? That's cheating.'

Before the assassin could raise the gun and point it forward, Sunny raised his leg and delivered a devastating push kick to the middle of the man's sternum.

It was powerful enough to shatter ribs — but more importantly, it was powerful enough to throw the bastard far back.

And behind him… was the window.

The assassin shattered the glass with his back and tumbled over the parapet, letting in the noise of the rain and the chilly wind.

He fell down surrounded by sharp shards, leaving the same way he had come — accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.

'...Which floor do I live on, again?'

Sunny approached the broken window and looked down.

The body sprawled on the wet asphalt far below was still moving. The man shuddered, then climbed to his feet slowly and staggered away, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

'That bastard.'

Throwing the curtain over the shattered window to avoid cutting himself, Sunny climbed out, grabbed the slippery drain pipe, and nimbly descended to the ground.

The rain pelted his naked torso, and his wet hair got into his eyes. Worse of all, his black pajama pants were swiftly absorbing water.

Sunny followed the trail of blood to a fence a dozen meters away. A random passerby gasped when noticing his tattoo, then hurried away with a terrified expression on their face.

Passing the fence, Sunny just barely saw the wounded assassin disappearing around the corner. There was someone standing at the side of the road, as well, wearing a torn raincoat and an unassuming cap. They were staring at the blood left in the wake of the failed killer.

'Another chance witness. Why aren't all of these people sleeping?'

In the red neon light of a nearby shop sign, the passerby looked like he was bathed in blood.

Sunny walked barefoot across the puddles, then stopped and looked at the chance witness darkly. He looked at Sunny as well…

And then smiled with amusement.

Sunny could see his pale body reflecting in the ragged man's mirror-like eyes.

"Ah, what a nice surprise. Fancy seeing you here, Detective. Are you out for a nice evening stroll?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"...Cut the crap. I know who you are."

Mordret — the Prince of Nothing — studied him for a moment, and then chuckled.

"I know who you are, too."

He smiled pleasantly.

"You're the man who killed my father."

Chapter-2487: Fighting in the Rain

Sunny and Mordret faced each other in the rain. The trail of blood was slowly being washed off the wet asphalt, and the neon sign kept blinking above them, drowning the street in dim radiance.

Mordret's mirror-like eyes seemed to shine with a dark crimson glow as they reflected the world back upon itself. His pleasant smile felt... dangerous.

Feeling a bit hateful was only natural for someone who knew that Sunny had killed their father, even if the source of that hate was somewhat unconventional in this particular case.

Sunny looked at Mordret somberly, not showing any sign of being disturbed.

He loathed to admit it…

But he was rather cold.

'Damn.'

Why had he not put on a jacket before jumping out of the window? It was raining outside, and the night was chilly!

Perhaps it was because he had grown used to not being bothered by the weather.

Looking Mordret in the eye, Sunny grinned.

"Why? Jealous?"

Mordret's dangerous smile slowly widened.

Raising his head, he laughed.

"Jealous? Ah… no, not quite. Jealousy is not the word I would use."

Taking off his cap, he allowed the rain to pelt his tousled black hair for a moment, then swept it back and pierced Sunny with a cold, eerie gaze.

The neon sign blinked, and for a moment, his mask of pleasant friendliness seemed to crack, revealing a raging ocean of scathing fury and boundless loathing beneath.

But then, the sign lit up, and Mordret seemed… almost normal again.

He smiled and shook his head, taking a step to circle Sunny.

"My, my. I had a feeling that there was something off when the valiant Devil Detective kept popping up near my other self. So, I wanted to make sure that he was indeed who he claimed to be… that question has been answered, I suppose. Imagine my surprise, though, when I saw a man flying through your window while keeping watch. How scandalous!"

Mordret chuckled.

"Do you often toss people out of the window… Sunless? Was that the name you use? I hope you'll forgive me if I don't address you as the Lord of Shadows. That title is a bit unwieldy."

Sunny turned slowly, keeping Mordret in his line of sight.

'He sure is in a talkative mood.'

It seemed that the Prince of Nothing had been staying close to his other self, watching him closely. And if his words were to be believed… he had not sent the killer to get rid of Sunny. Instead, he had simply been investigating a person sticking close to the Valor Group heir when the assassination attempt had taken place.

But why was Mordret watching over his other self? What was he doing here in Mirage City? How had his nicer version ended up in the Great Mirror, to begin with?

Sunny gave Mordret a cold stare.

"That is indeed a name I use, and no, only on occasion. Oh, by the way… I have some questions for you. You can answer them the easy way or the hard way. It's your choice."

He smiled darkly.

"I really hope you choose the hard way, though."

Mordret studied him for a few moments.

"You know, Sunless, I always wondered where this animosity you feel toward me stems from. I think I was quite courteous the first time we met, back in Godgrave. Admittedly… I did try to take you as a vessel when you dismissed that eerie mask of yours. But can you really blame me? I mean, you had been provoking me the whole time."

Sunny shrugged.

"I can blame you. I do blame you, as it happens."

Mordret's smile slowly drained from his face. Looking at Sunny with a chilling lack of emotion in his eyes, he said evenly:

"How regrettable. Who knew there would be an army of abominations hidden in your soul? But, Sunless… you might have noticed that we are mundane here, in Mirage City. Which means that there's no legion of Nightmare Creatures to protect you from me."

At the end there, his voice grew a bit lower, making him sound quite menacing.

Sunny was not intimidated, though.

Instead, he grinned.

"...The hard way it is, then."

He lunged forward, throwing his fist in Mordret's face. Mordret deflected it easily enough, but that blow was merely a feint — a split second later, Sunny unleashed a hurricane of kicks and punches,

aiming to bring the Prince of Nothing down.

He had absorbed countless battle styles for unarmed combat, so fighting with his bare hands was no less familiar to Sunny than wielding deadly weapons. In fact, his hands were deadly weapons in and of themselves.

Mordret laughed, evading the barrage of strikes with infuriating ease.

"Ah… this is great. This is wonderful! You know, I've grown tired of killing men of powerful combat Aspects while possessing no similar powers myself over the years. This place evens that playing field, though. How refreshing!"

He caught Sunny's fist in a vice grip and added in a low tone:

"I remember you sent me a gift not too long ago, Sunless. Should I return the favor?"

He was talking about the Cursed Demon, Abjuration, of course.

'Oops.'

In the next moment, Sunny found himself on the receiving end of Mordret's fury. The bastard did not lack combat skill by any means, and now that they were both mundane, small things like height and reach mattered much more than usual. On top of that, Sunny was still not used to his altered state.

The loss of shadow essence, of the [Feather of Truth] trait of the Onyx Shell that had become a staple of his battle technique, and even of his Aspect was not too difficult to adjust to. But it was the absence of shadow sense that truly made him feel like a cripple.

Sunny felt like a blind man.

So, he found himself nearly defenseless against Mordret's vicious assault.

The Prince of Nothing battered his defense until it was completely unraveled, then callously sent a devastating punch flying toward Sunny's temple.

Sunny knew that he would not be able to evade it, deflect it, or block it.

He didn't try.

Instead, he turned his head slightly and took the blow straight on.

'Ah… crap…'

Despite Mordret's slender build and refined manners, his fist truly packed a punch.

Sunny did not even feel any pain, just found himself suddenly dazed and reeling. He could also feel blood streaming down his face from a cut above his brow.

But that did not stop him from raising both hands and catching Mordret's wrist.

The Prince of Nothing frowned.

"What are you…"

Pulling his enemy off balance, Sunny unceremoniously head-butted him in the face. Mordret staggered back with a stifled curse, blood pouring from his nose. Before he could recover, Sunny pivoted on one foot and delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to the side of his head. No matter how skilled Mordret was, he was still thrown to the ground in a daze.

"How about I reunite you with your father, bastard?"

Taking a step forward, Sunny prepared to stomp on Mordret's head and crack his skull.

But instead, something glinted in the red neon light, and he felt a chill penetrate his flesh, followed by sharp pain.

Grasping his side, Sunny staggered back.

His pants were already soaked by rain, but now, they were being washed by blood, too.

'That… damn miscreant…'

Mordret slowly rose to his feet, smiling darkly. There was a narrow switchblade in his hand, its pale steel painted red.

'Why is everyone dying to stab me today?!'

Sunny let out an infuriated growl.

"You think a little knife will stop me from killing you?"

The growl... seemed to take Mordret aback. Enough so for him to hesitate, at least — instead of trying to stab Sunny, he looked somewhere behind him warily and lowered the switchblade.

"Maybe not. But they will."

Turning his torso to see what Mordret was looking at — while still keeping an eye on the bastard — Sunny saw a few silhouettes looming in the windows of his apartment complex.

He could not discern their features, but his neighbors were all eerily motionless, still, all staring down at him with glassy eyes.

Dozens of them.

Mordret smiled faintly.

"Detective Sunless… I suggest you stop behaving erratically."

His smile faded quickly, though.

"Unless you want to become the next victim of the Nihilist, that is."

Chapter-2488: Castellan

'The Nihilist?'

What did Mordret mean?

The laceration on Sunny's forehead and the cut on his abdomen stung, but he was much more uncomfortable because of the motionless figures staring at him with empty eyes from the windows.

He knew what was happening.

Just like Effie's family had reacted to her acting out of character, so were Sunny's neighbors unsettled by his fight with Mordret. Something about it was not in character for the Devil Detective, and the Others inhabiting Mirage City were unhappy about it.

Sunny did not know what would happen if he continued to attack the Prince of Nothing, and suspected that he would not want to find out.

But what did it have to do with the Nihilist?

Frowning, Sunny looked at Mordret and asked:

"Aren't you the Nihilist?"

He knew by now that Mordret was not the serial killer terrorising Mirage City — instead, he was the target of the serial killer. However, there was no point in revealing his cards to the Prince of Nothing. Rather, Sunny wanted to learn a thing or two from how he would react.

Wiping the blood off his lips, Mordret smiled.

"No need to play coy. The fact that you seem to remember yourself means that Raised by Wolves is here, too. And she would have recognized the faces of my vessels, given time. So, you know that I

am not the Nihilist."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"If not you, then who? Your other self?"

Mordret laughed.

"That pathetic creature? Goodness, no. He's too useless to kill anyone."

'Not a fan of his good twin, then.'

Sunny grimaced.

"So who is going around massacring people?"

Mordret stared at him for a few moments, then leaned down to pick up his cap.

"Why should I answer? It would be foolish to share information with someone who is here to kill me."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Here… to kill him?'

His mind spun at high speed.

No… it made sense. Mordret did not know about the fragment of Weaver's Lineage hidden in the Great Mirror — so, he would not know that Sunny had come to retrieve it. Why would Sunny have come, then?

The only reasonable explanation was that he had followed Mordret and Morgan inside. And since Mordret could actually be killed here — at least according to Morgan — he would naturally assume that the only reason for the Lord of Shadows to visit Mirage City was to hunt him down.

But that wasn't Sunny's goal.

Killing Mordret was just a delightful bonus.

He scoffed.

"Aren't you too full of yourself? Why would I waste my time and risk my life trying to kill you? My arrival at Mirage City had nothing to do with you, your better half, or even your sister. In fact, I'd prefer it if none of you were here."

Mordret remained silent for a moment, then threw an uneasy glance at the figures looming in the windows.

Come to think of it… he looked a little haggard. It was especially noticeable after spending some time in the company of the glamorous CEO of the Valor Group — this Mordret's face was gaunt, sharp, and burdened in comparison.

It seemed like surviving in the Great Mirror was not easy for the Prince of Nothing.

Mordret looked back at Sunny, considered something for a second, and then offered him his usual pleasant smile.

"It is hard to believe… but sadly, there is not much time for us to continue this polite conversation. Sure, why not? I will tell you about the Nihilist."

He chuckled.

"I am not the Nihilist… and neither is my other self. Nevertheless, you will have great trouble catching this particular killer, Detective."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"And why is that?"

Mordret's eyes ignited with an ominous vermilion glow under the light of the neon sign.

"You really don't know? Ah… well, you have not been here long."

He closed his eyes for a moment, then said in a pleasant tone:

"That is because the Nihilist is nobody in particular. The killer you

are searching for... is Mirage City itself. This entire city is the killer."

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

'That…'

He couldn't help but shiver.

"What the hell do you mean?"

Mordret smiled and nodded to the figures looming in the windows subtly.

"It's just like I said. There is not a single killer walking around searching for prey. Instead, any random passerby can become the Nihilist for a period of time, slaughter their victim, then turn back to normal. Or rather… I should say that there was not a single killer. There may very well be one now."

His words were making less and less sense. Sunny scowled, then asked in a frustrated tone:

"Once again, what the hell do you mean? Why would there be an actual Nihilist now, even if there was not one before?"

Glancing at the apartment complex, Sunny froze.

That was because there were no figures in the windows anymore. All of them had disappeared, and the building seemed empty.

As if the people who had been staring at him had either lost interest...

Or were walking out of their apartments and descending the stairs to reach him, instead.

Mordret slowly backed away.

"How do you think this place works, Sunless?"

He smiled darkly.

"In theory, it should be controlled by the master of Bastion. But the

Great Mirror has stood abandoned for too long… the sorcery governing it has become twisted and corrupted over the eons."

Putting on his cap, Mordret hid the bloodied switchblade in his pocket.

"Or rather, the custodian Mirage left behind to take care of her palace has become twisted. A very special reflection among reflections… the Castellan. It was supposed to help the Master of the Castle control the Great Mirror, but at some point, it broke."

He smiled.

"Now, the poor thing doesn't know what to do. It refuses to recognize anyone as the Master of the Castle, but it still tries to fulfill its duty. That is why it created Mirage City when my other self became a guest of the Great Mirror. This place is meant to fulfill his fantasies, after all."

Mordret laughed.

"But, Sunless… what happens when more guests arrive? What happens when Morgan imagines killing her brother? What happens when you keep thinking about catching the Nihilist? What happens… when all these dreams collide and start conflicting with each other?"

His smile widened a little, turning dark and sinister.

"The Palace of Imagination will attempt to protect itself by removing the contaminating influences. It will correct Mirage City in a way that creates a believable reason for you to die. Look, it is already happening… someone has sent an assassin to get rid of you, after all. Who knows, maybe a real Nihilist has already been created, as well, as if he has always existed."

As Sunny grimaced, blood still flowing from his cut abdomen, Mordret chuckled and turned to dash into an alley.

"Oh, and by the way…"

He paused for a moment and gave Sunny a pitying look.

"You won't be the only one Mirage City tries to remove. So, if you brought other people with you… well, anyway, I'd go give Raised by Wolves a call."

A moment later, he was gone, dissolved into the curtain of rain.

Sunny did not follow.

Left alone in the ominous light of the red neon sign, he shivered. Then, his eyes widened suddenly.

Effie knew who she was, so he wasn't too worried about her.

However…

'Saint!'

Chapter-2489: Pursuit of Balance

"Miss Morgan? Can you hear me?"

Saint sighed.

The woman in front of her was not responding. She was strapped into a straitjacket, sitting in a wheelchair, and looking quietly into the barred window of her patient room with an absent expression on her pale face.

The world outside the window was dark. It was already late into the night, far past the time Saint was supposed to get off work. Her schedule was in shambles… which was a point of intense frustration. However, she could not do anything about it — this particular patient gave a whole new meaning to the word VIP, so Saint had been assigned to her and ordered to get to the bottom of her condition with utmost haste.

She had been spending a lot of time with this patient as of late, but things were not going well. That hurt her pride.

Miss Morgan… was a difficult puzzle.

She was both unhinged and chillingly cunning at times, and worse than that, she was prone to violent episodes. Worst of all, though, was the fact that this seemingly delicate woman somehow managed to deliver eerily gruesome wounds to the orderlies each time they tried to restrain her. Several had already been hospitalized, some of them irreversibly maimed and crippled.

Therefore, Miss Morgan was put in a straitjacket and regularly fed a cocktail of powerful neuroleptics, which curbed some of her violent behavior, but made Saint's work much more difficult.

After all, how was she supposed to have a conversation with a person who had been drugged out of their mind?

It was almost as if the leadership of the hospital had no intention of helping this patient, and was perfectly content simply keeping her locked up.

Letting out another sigh, Saint left a note in her journal and stood to leave.

"I will see you tomorrow, then."

She was almost to the door when Morgan suddenly spoke — it was the first sentence she had spoken today, making Saint stop.

"You… something is different about you today."

Saint lingered for a moment, then turned around.

She did not say anything, studying her patient silently.

Morgan studied her, as well.

…Why did it seem like her eyes had a scarlet glint to them?

Naturally, it was impossible. Iris pigmentation was determined by the melanin saturation level and varied from brown or dark brown, which could appear black in certain lighting, to lighter shades like green, blue, and grey. In rare cases, such as albinism, melanin was entirely absent, which exposed blood vessels behind the iris and gave the eyes a pale reddish tint.

However, there were no people with vibrant, vivid vermilion eyes.

Saint frowned subtly.

'I must have seen wrong.'

Morgan, meanwhile, smiled slowly.

"You are... real, aren't you? But how strange. I don't recognize you. Well, no matter — since you arrived with that man, you must be one

of his."

She seemed to be delirious, talking nonsense. In fact, considering the amount of antipsychotic medications administered to this patient, it was a miracle that she was able to form coherent sentences at all.

Morgan's smile did not seem like that of a person heavily dosed with tranquilizers, though.

She chuckled.

"Tell him to come see me."

She looked at something behind Saint, then exhaled slowly.

"...Then again, maybe I'll come see him myself."

With that, she turned to look out the window with an absent expression once again. The brief moment of lucidity seemed to have come to an end.

Saint remained silent for a few moments, then turned around and left the room. The padded steel door locked behind her with a loud click.

'Her condition seemed to have worsened. I must make them change her prescriptions at all costs.'

An unfamiliar nurse and a few orderlies were loitering in the corridor outside. She did not recognize any of them, which would have been strange on a usual day… there had been many new hires as of late, though, precisely because of the patient in the room behind her. Saint had not memorized their faces just yet.

Still, the fact that they were new did not mean that there was an excuse for how poorly they were carrying out their duties.

Saint frowned, then forced herself to speak:

"Do you know what time it is? Why hasn't anyone helped the patient to bed yet? Were you planning to keep her in that wheelchair the entire night?"

One of the orderlies looked down.

"Sorry, doctor. We will strap her in right now."

Shaking her head slightly, Saint left them behind.

Her schedule was already a mess, but if there was one thing she could not compromise on, it was proper sleep. Sleep was a cornerstone of both physical and mental health, so Saint maintained a healthy sleep cycle meticulously. She had to clock out and return home swiftly.

Soon enough, Saint left the hospital building, opened an umbrella, and headed to where her car was parked. She looked at the phone while walking to check the time and noticed a dozen missed calls from a certain number. Detective Sunless seemed not to have taken her warning seriously.

Pursing her lips, Saint blocked his number and put her phone away, retrieving the car key instead. Approaching her car, she exhaled slowly and looked up.

The hospital was situated on the outskirts of the city, in the prestigious northern suburbs. So, the view would have been quite picturesque on a normal day — sadly, the world was veiled by rain, and the stars were obscured by the heavy mass of storm clouds.

The only bright lights Saint could see were the spotlights on the immense dam towering above the city in the north. Behind it was one of the three great lakes of Mirage City — due to the heavy rainfall, its levels had risen, so the floodgates of the recently renovated dam were open.

Saint could hear the hum of falling water even from a distance. That water would feed the main lake — the Mirror Lake — and if that was not enough, the floodgates of the southern dam would be open as well to alleviate the pressure.

That was how Mirage City, built around a system of three artificial lakes, avoided drowning during the storm season. It remained safe and sound by maintaining balance, releasing pressure when needed, and letting the water flow between the three lakes.

All systems pursued balance above everything else, after all. That was their nature.

A human mind was much the same. It needed balance to stay healthy… all disorders originated from instability and imbalance.

Saint wondered what Miss Morgan's imbalance was. What was there that she, who had everything in the world at her fingertips, lacked? Or was that exactly the root of the problem…

The fact that she had too much.

Shaking her head, Saint raised the key to unlock her car.

It was then that she sensed movement behind her, and suddenly, there was something sharp and thin wrapped around her neck.

Chapter-2490: Heal Thyself

'I am being strangled.'

Saint found herself strangely calm despite the fact that someone had wrapped a garrotte around her neck, as if situations like this were nothing new to her — familiar and trifling, rather.

She noted the strangeness of her reaction and filed it away to be analyzed later, reasonably assessing that now was not the time for self-reflection.

Her instincts kicked in, proving that countless hours of training had not been in vain. Before Saint could even register what was happening, her body moved on its own, and she just barely managed to insert her hand between the cold garrote and her neck before the sharp string drew taut.

The rain obscured everything around, its rustle drowning all the sounds. Light was pouring out of the hospital's windows no more than a hundred meters away, but even if Saint screamed, no one would hear her — not that she could scream with all the pressure being put on her throat.

'Ah…'

The assailant pulled on the garrote, and Saint suddenly couldn't breathe anymore. The string bit into her fingers, threatening to sever them, and she felt blood flowing down her wrist.

Despite the horror of the situation, Saint felt a pang of annoyance. The sleeve of her trench coat, the blouse beneath… washing out blood stains was going to be such a hassle. The trench coat might survive, considering its hydrophobic coating, but the fabric of the expensive blouse would be positively ruined.

But then again…

Maybe she would not have to wash her clothes.

Because she would be dead.

'Somebody is trying to kill me.'

But who?

A violent robber? A deranged patient? An obsessive stalker?

Anything and everything was possible.

She could feel his mass behind her, pressing her into into his heavy body and pulling on the garrote with monstrous strength — no matter how much time Saint had spent exercising and honing her body, she would never be able to overpower an opponent who was that much larger, that much heavier, and that much stronger on top of that.

"Akhhhh…"

A hoarse, undignified noise escaped from her lips.

'Damnation.'

Leaning against the assailant to support her weight, Saint raised her leg… and slammed the sole of her boot against the door of her car.

Newton's Third Law of Motion — for every action, there was an equal and opposite reaction. Saint had unleashed a potent force upon the car, and was pushed in the opposite direction with equal force.

The car did not move, obviously, but Saint and the man strangling her were thrown back.

He collided with the next car in the row, denting it, and lost his balance. At the same time, Saint slammed the back of her head into his face.

The pull on the garrote weakened for a split second, which allowed

her to slip free.

Saint rolled away while feverishly gulping air. She did not care about dirtying her clothes in the puddles anymore — all she cared about was being able to breathe once again.

Steadying herself with one arm, she attempted to plan her next actions carefully.

…Everyone had a plan until they got kicked in the face.

Someone's heavy boot collided with her cheekbone, sending Saint back to the ground. A moment later, a vicious kick landed on her ribs, throwing her into the side of the car.

"Ah, crap. Hey, dimwit, can't you even handle a girl?"

"Shut your mouth! I think she broke my nose, dammit!"

Saint heard the voices through her daze.

'There are two of them.'

She gritted her teeth, then used the car for support and slowly rose to her feet.

One of the two dark figures looked at her with a hint of surprise.

"Look at that, she stood up. We got a tough one this time, huh?"

The second lowered his hand, revealing a bloodied face, and gestured to her angrily.

"Who cares? Get her!"

The first man grinned.

"Tough ones last longer. I like it."

A moment later, the blade of a sharp hunting knife glinted in his hand.

Saint stared at the knife with a strange indifference.

She had learned countless techniques on how to defend herself against an armed opponent.

However, every instructor she had ever worked with told her the same thing:

'The best defense against a knife… is to run away.'

Running away was the optimal solution.

So, she did exactly that.

Turning around, Saint dashed away.

The ground was slippery, and her designer boots had heels. Nevertheless, her form and speed were quite impressive — by the time the two assailants reacted, she had already created a bit of distance between them and herself.

They lunged in pursuit without wasting any time, though.

'Run, run, run…'

Saint wished she could have sprinted toward the hospital, but sadly, the assailants had barred that direction. So, she was running toward the road instead.

Somehow, it felt wrong. Logically, Saint understood that running away from two larger, stronger, better-armed enemies was the right thing to do… but something inside of her rebelled against that idea.

She wanted to live, though, so she forced that inexplicable feeling down.

By the time Saint reached the road, the assailants had practically caught up with her. She had hoped that there would be cars passing by, but sadly, the street was dark and empty… no, not quite.

There was a car parked across the road, and the driver was outside, smoking as he hid the cigarette in his palm to shield it from the rain.

Hope!

Saint raised a hand, wishing to call out to the stranger.

But the words froze on her lips.

Perhaps it was because of his black gloves, or perhaps it was because of the glassy, eerie look in his eyes… but she instinctively knew that the man was not going to help her.

On the contrary, he was one of the attackers. Their driver, perhaps.

'There are… three of them.'

And she was surrounded.

The smoking man noticed her by then. He frowned, tossed the cigarette away, and lunged across the road, leaving her nowhere to run.

'What do I do?'

Saint froze, feeling a little desperate.

…In the next moment, an old black car appeared out of the rain, sending the third assailant flying over its hood. His body struck the road with a dull thud and remained laying there, broken and motionless, while the car skidded to a stop.

Its door opened, and someone whom Saint had never expected to see climbed out of it.

It was… the man whose number she had recently blocked, Detective Sunless.

She stared at her former patient with wide eyes, feeling both relieved and confused to see him.

And happy, as if him being there was the most natural thing in the world.

Not quite a guardian angel...

Wearing dark clothes and an even darker expression, her personal

devil looked behind Saint and scowled.

"Hey, bastards. Why are you bothering my therapist? Are you two degenerate lowlifes tired of living, or what? If you are, stop wasting everyone's time and come here. I'll kill you."

He paused for a moment and winced.

"I mean… I'll arrest you? Yeah. That is what I will… no, you know what, I am not going to lie. I'll definitely kill you…"

Chapter-2491: Keep Calm

The assailants studied the detective with somber expressions. One of them threw a furtive glance at the broken body laying on the wet asphalt; the other showed no concern for the fate of their fallen comrade whatsoever.

Instead, he grinned.

"Look at that. A prince on a white horse appeared to save the damsel."

Detective Sunless shook his head as he walked in their direction.

"Are you colorblind or something? My car is obviously black. And I am not a prince."

He smiled darkly.

"I am a king. Well… a sovereign, to be precise."

The assailant laughed.

"Did you hear that? That was way too funny, man. We have an actual psycho on our hands! One of her patients, I guess."

Detective Sunless passed by Saint, who had stood frozen throughout the entire exchange. Now, finally, she shook off her daze and called out to him in a subdued tone:

"They are armed."

He glanced at her briefly.

"Of course they are."

There was not a hint of concern in his voice.

The detective walked past Saint and continued on his way toward the two attackers. She considered whether she was supposed to help him… it seemed only natural to do so, for some reason, to the point that she almost took a step to follow him.

But then, Saint reminded herself of what she was doing. Fighting armed bandits in the rain was not something an ordinary person like herself was supposed to engage in. She had accepted the frightening situation with an abnormal level of calmness, but actually, a normal person would be terrified and in a panic right now, doing their best to escape.

'Should I escape? No… should I try to find help? Police! Should I call the police?'

But the police was already here…

Before Saint could decide on a course of action, Detective Sunless and the two bandits lunged at each other.

Then, things happened swiftly.

The one with the knife slashed at the detective's neck, aiming to slit his throat open. The other had produced a telescopic baton out of somewhere and attacked from the other side, bringing it down on the detective's head. They worked well with each other, moving with a shared purpose to leave the victim no way to escape.

Detective Sunless did not try to escape, though.

Instead, he caught the first assailant's wrist and pushed it aside, making the knife miss his neck. At the same time, he lowered his torso and kicked the second assailant in the chest, sending him staggering back.

"Pathetic… now I am less offended about only warranting one assassin while Saint gets three. My guy was a professional, at least."

The ensuing brawl was short, violent, and bloody. Despite what Detective Sunless had said, the two men fighting him were not amateurs — they were trained, vicious, and clearly accustomed to hurting people.

Nevertheless, he handled them with such a chilling level of cruel, nonchalant ruthlessness that it was hard to tell which side of the conflict was the criminal, and which side was the victim. Saint had extensive martial training, but she had never witnessed such startling brutality.

Detective Sunless was not a brute, though. She had enough skill to recognize just how impressive his technique and combat intelligence were. Every movement was precise and purposeful, every step was taken with calculated intent.

He tore through the heavy streams of rain with fierce momentum, always a step ahead of his opponents. It was almost as if he was controlling the two assailants like marionettes, dictating their every move — his own attacks, meanwhile, were vicious and devastating, but also elegant in their economic efficiency. There was a cadence to it all, a strange melody…

Almost like a dance.

'I was… meaning to call the police…'

Saint had forgotten what she was meant to do.

A pained wail drowned out the rustling of the rain.

There was a revolting squelch of tearing flesh, and the crack of breaking bone. One of the assailants reeled back, his arm mangled terribly and bent at an unnatural angle. Before the second one could react, his own knife plunged between his ribs, and then a crushing blow landed on his face. As he fell to his knees with a groan, a vicious kick landed on his head.

Detective Sunless leaned down and picked up the telescopic baton that had fallen to the ground. When the assailant with the broken arm turned around to flee, he brandished it with startling speed, striking the man on the temple — the bandit fell like a toppled tree and remained laying on the asphalt, motionless.

"Argh… you… bastard… I'll kill you…"

The one with the knife in his chest grabbed the hilt with a shaking

hand, straining to pull it out.

The detective looked at him and said evenly, in a matter-of-fact tone:

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. That knife is the only thing keeping you alive."

But the assailant did not listen. He pulled the knife out, letting out a torrent of blood, then gripped it tightly and staggered to his feet.

As he took an unsteady step forward, Detective Sunless took an unhurried step back.

One, two, three, four…

By the fourth step, he was suddenly side by side with Saint.

She observed the harrowing scene with an odd indifference, as if seeing several men die in a violent confrontation was not worthy of riling up her emotions. The detective's presence was oddly soothing.

This reaction… was definitely not normal.

'I am probably in shock.'

The assailant pursued Detective Sunless with slow, swaying steps. Blood was flowing down his body, mixing with the rainwater on the ground.

One, two, three…

On the fourth step, his legs buckled, and he fell down. The knife rattled as it fell from his grip.

He did not move after that.

"You… killed them."

Saint's voice was calm. She was calm.

Why was she so calm?

Detective Sunless looked at her, remained silent for a moment, and

smiled.

"Why, yes. I promised to, after all. Haven't I told you? I'm the most honest person in the world."

'Three worlds, even.'

That was what he had said.

'Extreme case of delusion of grandeur, no doubt.'

Detective Sunless studied her for a few moments, then frowned.

"You're thinking something strange, aren't you? Why didn't you answer my calls?"

'Is that what's important right now?'

Saint took a deep breath.

Then, she answered evenly:

"I was off the clock. My sleep schedule is very important... so, I don't take calls from patients outside the designated hours."

Chapter-2492: Dark and Handsome

Saint tried to come to terms with the situation.

She had been attacked by three strange men… they did not seem to have attacked her by chance, and they had not been trying to rob her either. They had come to kill her.

These men were dead now. One of her former patients — a detective from the Homicide Division of the Mirage City Police Department — had killed them with his bare hands, right in front of her eyes.

…Well, he had killed two of them with his bare hands. The third one, he had killed with his car.

And now, here she was.

Too calm to describe her current state as a normal reaction, probably in shock.

'They knew who I was. The detective seemed to have known that I would be attacked, as well. He arrived just in time.'

Looking away from the corpses, Saint brushed the wet strands of her hair away from her face and looked at Detective Sunless with a slight frown. Now that everything was over, she could finally feel the bruises on her face and the cuts on her fingers.

The pain was sobering.

"How did you know that I would be in danger, Detective?"

He stared at her for a moment, then let out a barely audible groan.

"Saint, you… you ask a lot of uncomfortable questions when you talk,

don't you?"

She did not deign to answer, looking at him impassively.

Detective Sunless shook his head, and then…

Suddenly took her hand.

The unexpected touch made Saint flinch.

"You're bleeding."

There was a dark expression on his face, and a dangerous undertone in his voice.

Taking out a handkerchief from his pocket, Detective Sunless carefully wrapped it around her cut fingers and spoke:

"To answer your question. Well, you see… I knew that you would be in danger because I had met Mordret — not the CEO of the Valor Group, but his evil twin, who is an insidious bastard of epic proportions, as well as a demented mass murderer who dabbles in genocide from time to time on top of that. He and I have never really seen eye to eye, which is entirely his fault, of course. The first time we met, I ended up locked in a cage because he wanted me for my body. And it only got worse from there… wait, no, that did not come out right!"

Saint pulled her hand away. Faced with her indifferent expression, Detective Sunless coughed.

"It didn't, I'm telling you! What I meant to say was that he wanted to possess my body like a ghost, that creep. Needless to say, I was not too keen on the idea. Who would have been? Anyway, he hates me too — for no good reason whatsoever, I might add. All I did was kill his dad… what's the big deal?"

Noticing a slight shift in Saint's expression, the detective added hurriedly:

"Don't get it wrong, though! It's not what you think. He only hates me because I managed to kill his dad before he could kill that insane

bastard himself. Let me tell you, that whole family is unwell… was unwell? In any case, they are all crazy… unlike us normal people..."

Hearing that, Saint tilted her head a little.

She regretted not having her notebook at hand.

'Projected patricide fantasies. Oedipus complex?'

He was such a fascinating case...

Detective Sunless sighed.

"In any case, I met that Mordret here in Mirage City — which is a grand illusion created by an ancient demon, as I mentioned before. He informed me that there is a problem with the… the control system of this entire place, so to speak, and as a result, every real person in Mirage City is in danger. Because Mirage City… is a serial killer."

Saint raised an eyebrow.

Detective Sunless remained silent for a moment, then shrugged.

"It is. There are very few real people in this creepy city, and we are on its victim list: me, you, both versions of Mordret, my partner Effie… oh, and Morgan, as well."

He nodded.

"That is how I knew that you would be in danger."

Then, his expression changed subtly, and he looked in the direction of the mental hospital.

"Oh, right. Morgan!"

Saint frowned, wondering if Detective Sunless was genuinely insane or simply continuing his act from their last meeting.

"What about Miss Morgan?"

He glanced at her with a somber expression.

"You might not believe me… but facts are facts. In the last two days, someone tried to kill everyone I mentioned. The CEO of the Valor Group barely survived an assassination attempt, I was nearly stabbed to death by a hired killer, you were assaulted by these three thugs, and my partner had to wipe the floor with a home invader. That… only leaves Morgan."

His eyes darkened.

"Who is pumped full of drugs and wearing a straitjacket."

Saint's frown deepened. Miss Morgan was indeed in no condition to defend herself. But…

"The security measures of our hospital are stellar. It is practically a fortress — there's barely a safer place in the city, so I can assure you, she is perfectly fine. I saw her just half an hour ago."

He shook his head.

"There are no fortresses that can't be breached, doc. Nowhere is safe, and nobody is safe either. For a thoroughly guarded place like your workplace… the easiest way to harm someone being kept there would probably be from within. Have there been many new faces around lately? People whom you don't know too well, or whose behavior changed all of a sudden?"

Saint opened her mouth to rebuke him, but didn't find the words to do so.

There had indeed been many new faces around as of late. People she knew had indeed been acting a bit strangely.

Detective Sunless grimaced.

"Curses!"

He fell silent for a moment, then said in an urgent tone:

"We need to go."

Before Saint could protest, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her

in the direction of the hospital. She had no choice but to follow him, still reeling from everything that had happened.

The detective's hold was firm and strangely reassuring.

'Let's just… see what happens.'

Her willingness to play along with his deranged charade was not a healthy reaction… but somehow, Saint found herself reluctant to resist, and lacking the desire to pull her arm out of his grasp.

'That's because I'm in shock. Definitely.'

They waded through the rain, hurrying toward the hospital. The entrance was just like Saint had left it — it was as if three men had not tried to kill her just a few hundred meters away from the brightly illuminated premises of the hospital.

The volunteer workers were still building a barricade out of sandbags around the building. The security guards welcomed her as if nothing had happened.

"Dr. Saint. Have you forgotten something?"

They stared down Detective Sunless with cold expressions.

Saint cleared her throat.

"Ah… yes. This is one of my patients. He is in need of an urgent consultation. You can check the system — there is a pass issued under his name, still."

The guards studied them for a few moments, then reluctantly stepped aside.

Saint and Detective Sunless hurried inside. Just as they were entering, a nurse who was leaving opened the door and held it for them politely, lowering her head in a respectful bow.

They walked inside.

A moment later, however, Detective Sunless froze in place.

"Stop."

Saint halted, giving him a questioning look.

He turned around with a tense expression on his handsome face.

The air was full of a subtle scent of blood.

"Where are you going, I wonder?"

Saint frowned, confused by the question. It took her a moment to realize that the question was not directed at her.

Following his gaze, she saw the nurse who had opened the door for them stopping halfway across the threshold.

The nurse lingered for a moment, then looked back.

She was wearing clean blue scrubs and a standard face mask, her black hair gathered in a tidy bun.

…Above the mask, two beautiful vermillion eyes were staring back at the detective with a cold, calm malice.

'Her eyes are red.'

They were definitely of a vibrant, vivid scarlet shade.

It was Morgan, the Valor Group heiress.

Chapter-2493: White Walls

Not long before that, Morgan heard the door lock after the psychiatrist left the room.

Some time later, the door opened again, and a nurse walked in, accompanied by three burly orderlies.

Morgan did not move, continuing to look out the window. She was seated in a wheelchair, her arms bound by a straitjacket… which wasn't that uncomfortable. What really drove her mad was that she was not allowed to shower without supervision, and the hospital staff was too afraid of her to wash her properly. Not that she would allow anyone to touch her.

Her personal hygiene situation was sorrowful.

Outside the window, the world was dark and veiled by rain. Distant spotlights were shining through the torrents of falling water on the dam that towered above the city like a great barrier. The sight of this illusory world... was strange and wondrous.

Morgan was not taking in the darkly beautiful landscape, though. She was tracking the movements of the four people who had entered her room in the reflections on the surface of the window.

The orderlies locked the door and took positions around her, while the nurse brightened the lights and went about preparing an injection. She filled a disposable syringe with a transparent liquid from a medical ampule, then flicked it a few times and pressed the plunger lightly to let out the tiny bubbles of air.

"Miss Morgan, I will administer your medicine now."

Her tone was pleasant and polite.

Morgan did not turn her way, continuing to face the window.

She did speak, however.

"How strange."

The nurse gave her a confused look. Most of her face was obscured by a mask, but there was definitely a silent question in her eyes.

"Strange? What do you mean?"

Morgan sighed.

"You are not afraid of me."

She finally turned her head, looking at the nurse calmly.

"Anyone on the hospital staff would be at least a little wary. You must be new. Come to think of it, I don't recognize any of you."

The nurse chuckled in a friendly manner.

"Oh, yes. There are a lot of recent hires in the hospital these days, Miss Morgan. Now, if you allow me…"

Morgan smiled faintly.

"Oh, but you see, not only do I not recognize you, but I am also not scheduled to receive any injections at this time. And on top of that…"

She glanced at the syringe the nurse was holding in her hand.

"The medication I've been receiving has a yellow tint. This one is entirely transparent, though. So, a nurse I don't recognize wants to inject me with a substance I don't know… at the wrong hour, no less. How peculiar, don't you think?"

The nurse remained silent for a while, looking at her kindly.

Then, kindness slowly drained from her eyes.

Giving one of the orderlies a cold stare, she said in a harsh tone:

"Hold her tightly. Ah, but make sure not to leave any bruises — it has to look natural, you know."

'Amusing.'

The orderlies stepped forward to hold Morgan down. Their rough hands landed on her neck and her shoulders, pressing her into the wheelchair and making it impossible for her to move. The nurse took a step in their direction, preparing the syringe.

Morgan laughed.

"Four entire people to handle one poor me. Well… I guess I'm worth it. I am Morgan of Valor, after all. Even if Valor doesn't exist anymore."

Her laughter stopped abruptly, and she pierced the nurse with a gaze so cold that it made the woman stumble.

"You made a mistake, though. Do you know what your mistake is?"

Morgan's hands moved under the white fabric of the straitjacket, as if she was turning her wrists.

A derisive smile twisted her scarlet lips.

"Thinking that just four will be enough."

The nurse had regained her composure by then. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice gained a mocking undertone:

"Don't mind her. What can she even…"

Then, there was the sound of tearing fabric, and Morgan's ten fingers easily pierced the straitjacket. She pulled her hands down, and the tough fabric parted easily, as if cut by ten razor-sharp knives.

"I suggest you run."

But, of course, the three muscular orderlies holding her down and the nurse carrying a syringe full of an unidentified substance did not listen to her advice.

The patient room had padded walls. It was quite soundproof when it needed to be.

…When the screams died out, Morgan exhaled slowly and looked up, at the white ceiling of the sterile room that had served as her prison cell for the past few months.

The ceiling was painted red with chaotic splatters now. The soft padding on the floor was slowly absorbing vast puddles of blood. The walls were torn apart and dripping crimson.

There was barely any white left in the room.

Pulling off the pitiful remains of her straitjacket, Morgan turned to the only corner that remained free of the blood. There, the supposed nurse was pressing herself against the soft walls, shivering as she looked up at Morgan with horror.

"M—monster! Monster! You are..."

Dropping the torn straitjacket to the floor, Morgan walked over to the shaking woman and crouched near her.

"Hey, you."

She picked up the abandoned syringe from the floor and looked at the nurse impassively.

"Do you know why I left you for last?"

The woman tried to press herself even deeper into the wall, shaking her head in terror.

Morgan smiled.

"It's because I wanted to… keep your uniform clean…"

Some time later, the lights in the patient room went out. The door opened, and a woman in blue scrubs walked out into the corridor. Her face was covered by a mask, and her black hair was gathered in a tidy bun. She looked perfectly unassuming, just like any other nurse in the private wing of the psychiatric hospital.

The door locked behind her with an audible click.

As the woman headed away with confident steps, a passing doctor gave her a stare, and then asked in a confused tone:

"Huh? Did you just walk out of that room?"

The woman lowered her eyes and answered politely.

"Yes. Please keep your voice down, doctor — Miss Morgan is asleep."

He studied her silently for a few moments…

Then chuckled.

"You went there alone? Brave girl!"

Shaking his head and chuckling, the doctor walked away, leaving the woman alone.

She did not linger, either, and soon, no one was left in front of the locked door and its dark window.

Chapter-2494: Escaped Lunatic

Morgan made her way through the hospital without being discovered by anyone. Nobody paid her much attention — when they did, she greeted them in a polite tone and calmly walked past, pretending to be busy running an errand. At some point, though, she had to spend five minutes chatting with an especially outgoing staff member.

The man did not suspect anything and left the conversation with a pleasant impression of the polite newbie, having given the rookie several pieces of priceless advice.

Morgan used the ID card of the woman she had killed in her patient room to unlock the door to the common area of the hospital, nodded at the security guard stationed there while hiding the blood-stained ID card in her pocket, and headed for the lobby.

A few minutes later, she opened the door and felt the rustling of the rain envelop her.

The smell of fresh air was sweet.

Before she could step outside, however, she saw someone familiar right in front of her.

It was the Lord of Shadows, in all his rugged glory, dragging her astonishingly beautiful psychiatrist behind him.

The taciturn woman had a bloodied handkerchief wrapped around her hand.

Not showing any reaction, Morgan bowed politely and held the door for them. Her heartbeat stayed steady as the pair walked past her — once they entered the lobby, she took a step forward.

But then…

"Stop."

'Damn it.'

Morgan lingered for a moment, then turned around and looked at the Lord of Shadows coldly.

"Where are you going, I wonder?"

She studied him silently, evaluating the situation.

Usually, she would have stood no chance against a Sovereign…

But they were all equal here, in Mirage City.

Some were more equal than others were, though. For all intents and purposes, everyone here seemed to be perfectly mundane — with one important exception.

Their Flaws were still binding them like chains.

In the case of Morgan, her Flaw made it so that everything she touched was cut. That cruel curse had cast a lonesome shadow over most of her adult life, but here in Mirage City, it was suddenly an advantage.

Morgan was pretty sure that she could kill the Lord of Shadows and his stunning companion, if it came to that.

She remained silent for a moment, and then smiled darkly beneath the mask.

"How's my little sister doing? You're treating her right?"

He looked at her with an unhappy expression.

"Would you quit calling her your sister? It's weird. And for the record — yes, she's doing great. I try."

Morgan felt the deep grooves forming on the handle of the door under her fingers.

'So, he did find Athena, after all.'

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"And for the record — yes, she's doing great. I try."

Saint stared at Detective Sunless, who in turn stared at the nurse… at Morgan, the heiress of the Valor Group, who was somehow out of the patient ward and free of her straitjacket.

Strangely enough, she did not seem particularly violent or unhinged, Sharp and dangerous, maybe… but perfectly in control of her thoughts and actions.

Her eyes were also of an impossible scarlet color now, apparently.

And… her sister was dating Detective Sunless?

Saint would have been pleased for her patient and happy that he was building positive relationships, if not for the fact that it was impossible. Not only because there was only one daughter in the Valor family, but also because he had been full of loathing and fixated on persecuting Morgan's brother as the culprit in the Nihilist killings for many months.

'What are they talking about?'

Saint was utterly confused.

Morgan, meanwhile, let go of the door and took a step back.

"See you later, then. Oh, by the way... can I borrow an umbrella?"

Detective Sunless threw a sideways glance at the security guards. His gaze seemed tense, for some reason.

Saint realized then that it was eerily quiet in the lobby of the hospital. Everyone — the guards, the staff members, the volunteers fortifying the building against potential floods — had grown motionless at some point, and were all staring at them with oddly emotionless, glassy eyes.

She could not help but shiver.

Detective Sunless smiled crookedly.

"You can. But I'll do you one better… I have a PTV. Want a ride?"

'Why is he offering an escaping mental patient a ride?'

Morgan hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Sure, why not. Lead the way."

Saint opened her eyes wide.

'Why is she agreeing?'

Still confused, she found herself following Detective Sunless and Morgan of the Valor family through the rain. Their steps were hurried, and they were looking around with wary gazes.

Their wariness transferred to Saint, as well.

It was hard to see because of the rain, and the parking lot was desolate and empty. Any number of people could be hiding in the darkness, so reaching the detective's car… his car…

Saint frowned.

'The corpses!'

The corpses of the three assailants were still on the road, and when Morgan saw them, her reaction was bound to be extreme. A fragile person like her could not be exposed to such traumatic stimuli.

But before Saint could do anything, they reached the car.

The corpses were still sprawled on the road, being battered by rain. The rain washed away the blood, but it was impossible to mistake the ghastly nature of the three dark shapes laying on the asphalt for anything but what they were.

'Oh, no.'

Saint looked at Morgan, concerned.

Morgan, meanwhile, glanced at the corpses with complete indifference.

A moment later, though, she smiled.

"Three… were these guys after the psychiatrist?"

Detective Sunless nodded, making Morgan's smile widen a little.

She gave the ghastly corpses another nonchalant glance.

"They sent four after me."

Then, she looked at the detective and asked curiously:

"What about you?"

He lingered with the answer for a while.

"A seasoned, elite assassin. Not rabble like these fools were."

Morgan studied him silently for a moment.

"So… one."

Detective Sunless scowled fiercely.

"He was the real deal, okay?!"

Mumbling something under his nose, he dragged the most gruesome corpse to the wayside, then walked back to the car and opened the door.

"Now, are you getting in or what?"

Shrugging, Morgan took off her facemask and climbed onto the backseat.

'I probably should not get into that car.'

Saint hesitated for a few moments…

And then got into the car.

'Damn it.'

Chapter-2495: Getaway Driver

There was a crack in the windshield where the thug's body hit it, but other than that, the PTV seemed fine. It started, at least, and sped away into the rain without problem.

Leaving the three corpses behind.

Sunny was driving, Saint was sitting stiffly in the passenger seat, while Morgan stretched on the backseat.

She looked around and grimaced.

"This… is your PTV?"

Sunny glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

"Sure. It trembles and roars like a dying abomination, but gets the job done. Actually…"

He smiled smugly.

"It uses flammable fuel and propels itself with a series of tiny explosions. Wild! Did you know?"

Morgan gave him a long look.

"Are you... describing how an internal combustion engine works? Of course, I know. It is one of the most important milestones in the history of technological development. Who wouldn't know that?"

Sunny's smile dimmed.

"You are no fun. Not everyone has time to study the history of technological development, damn it."

At that moment, Saint, who had remained silent that whole time,

finally spoke:

"Excuse me… but is it okay to just leave three dead bodies behind?"

Sunny gave her a brief glance.

"Seven."

Saint arched her exquisite eyebrow, a silent question in her eyes.

He shrugged.

"Didn't you hear Morgan saying that someone sent four people to deal with her? So, there are seven corpses, not three. She wouldn't have let them live."

Sprawled comfortably on the backseat, Morgan nodded nonchalantly.

Sunny gave Saint a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, though. The rain will wash away all the traces. It might even wash away the bodies. Those in the hospital will stay where they are, of course, but that is not a problem either. Valor Group will never allow the news that their heiress massacred four people and escaped a mental asylum to spread — they won't let the news that Morgan even was in a mental asylum spread. So, the investigation will be handled."

He did not add that the mental asylum in question was a shady place in and of itself. Considering how affluent the families of its patients were, what happened within its walls stayed within its walls, most likely.

He was sure that many horror stories no one ever learned about had taken place in the private wing of Saint's workplace.

Well… maybe not.

Other Mordret's fantasy was that of a nice and friendly place where his family loved him and prospered, after all. Why would he have imagined a dirty, rotten city where dark and ugly things happened in the shadows?

Then again, Sunny did not know a lot about the other Mordret. If the original Prince of Nothing had been split in two, it would have happened when he was twelve. Before that, he had been given away by his father and raised by Asterion in the Dream Realm. Who knew what his childhood had looked like, and what his idea of a nice place was?

But if Mordret's good twin had not imagined Mirage City as a dark city full of injustice and corruption… the question was, who had made this place into a twisted garden of sin? Whose thoughts had the Castellan faithfully woven into the fabric of the Palace of Imagination to change it into a den of horrors?

It could have been the real Mordret. That guy's head was full of nothing but vile and ghastly things, gods knew…

What was it that he had told Sunny once?

A mirror could only reflect what was in front of it. Was it his fault that the things in front of him were cruel, vile, and deceitful?

But it could have been someone other than Mordret, as well.

It could have been Morgan… or Effie. It could have even been Sunny himself.

All three of them had come from a world where nightmares were real. All three had spent most of their adult lives spilling blood and crawling through the bloody mud of countless battlefields. They had killed numerous living beings — monsters and humans alike — and experienced far too many terrible things not to be changed by these experiences.

Maybe Mirage City had become the dark, dirty, deadly place it was today because none of them could imagine a world that was anything but.

Sunny groaned slightly.

It was not because of this brief moment of self-reflection… rather, it was because the wound he had hurriedly patched up before rushing to find Saint opened sometime during the recent fight, and was

seeping with blood.

Saint lowered her gaze and noticed the blood stain slowly spreading across the black fabric of his shirt. She frowned, a hint of unhappiness twisting the beautiful lines of her bewitching face.

"You are bleeding… why are you bleeding?"

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Oh, it's nothing. I was stabbed."

Her eyes widened slightly.

"What? But… but I did not see you being hit during the confrontation with those people."

Sunny waved a hand dismissively.

"No, not by one of those amateurs. And it wasn't the professional, deadly, highly skilled assassin sent to kill me — I threw that guy out of a window."

He turned his head to glance at Morgan and grinned.

"I was stabbed by her brother. After I dealt with the assassin and before I dealt with the amateurs."

Morgan grinned.

"Busy day for you, huh?"

Sunny shrugged nonchalantly.

Saint, meanwhile, seemed to be struggling with maintaining her aloof exterior.

Her eyelashes, at least, trembled a little.

"You were stabbed… by the CEO of the Valor Group?"

Sunny chuckled.

"No, not him. His evil twin from the real world."

Morgan's relaxed gaze grew sharper all of a sudden.

"Oh… you've met him, then?"

Sunny nodded.

"I did. And he stabbed me. Ah, but don't misunderstand — I wasn't the only one bleeding when we parted."

Saint looked at him, then to Morgan.

Then, she looked back at him and bit her lip, as if unsure whether to say something.

In the end, however, her indignation seemed to have defeated her taciturn personality.

"Excuse me… is that important right now? Miss Morgan, why are you playing along with his bizarre statements? Did you not hear what Detective Sunless said? An evil twin from the real world! Why is your reaction so lackluster?"

Morgan gave her a strange look and blinked a couple of times.

After a few moments of silence, she shrugged.

"Because everything he said is true? The man playing the CEO role in this illusory realm, my brother, has a murderous twin from the real world. Who, I guess, is also my brother."

She shifted her gaze to Sunny and asked in a confused tone:

"Does she not remember anything?"

Then, Morgan frowned and looked at Saint.

"And since when is the Lord of Shadows, the dark Sovereign of humanity, the commander of an undying legion of dead souls… a detective?"

Saint inhaled slowly, closed her eyes for a moment, and then turned

to the window.

Sunny could just barely hear her mumble under her nose:

"Shared delusional disorder… it must be. Fascinating…"

Chapter-2496: Between the Cracks

With Saint seemingly falling into a daze, Sunny threw a glance into the rearview mirror and studied Morgan for a few moments.

The Princess of Valor… looked different from how she had been before.

Morgan had always given off a sharp and deadly aura, and all her actions had been calculated and precise. She had carried herself with the reserved elegance of a born noble, maintaining a neat appearance in all circumstances. She had been a person who preferred to maintain strict control of both herself and everything around her at all times.

That Morgan… would have never allowed herself to sprawl on the backseat of a ramshackle PTV in a perfectly comfortable pose, not even trying to maintain the rules of decorum.

She was still sharp and dangerous, just much more… relaxed and at ease.

As if she could not be bothered to care anymore.

…Granted, Morgan still managed to look elegant and like she owned the place even when wearing a nurse uniform and lounging in a rusty PTV. It was just that she brimmed with a decadent kind of elegance now instead of her usual refined poise.

Sunny sighed.

"So, why did Mordret come here, and why did you follow him to Mirage City?"

All the pieces to the strange puzzle of the Great Mirror were held by three people: Mordret, the other Mordret, and Morgan… the children of the late King of Swords.

'King of Swords…'

Sunny tensed.

He was not going to receive two "you killed my father" speeches in one day, was he?

Luckily, Morgan seemed entirely indifferent to the fact that she was sitting next to her father's killer. Hearing his question, she lingered for a few moments, then smiled.

"You got it all wrong… Sunless. It wasn't me who followed Mordret here. It was the other way around."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"You entered the Great Mirror first?"

Morgan nodded.

"Back then, after you and Nephis killed Ki Song… and my father… things were in utter chaos for the first few months, weren't they?"

Sunny nodded. The first months of the newly established Human Domain had indeed been hectic. After all, it was not easy to build a new world order on the ruins of an old one… luckily, they had received a lot of help.

Ironically enough, the Legacy Clans had played an important part in putting the world back on track. The government had been nothing short of instrumental, as well, with Jet mobilizing the great bureaucracies of its various arms to smooth out the transition.

Effie had taken control of the Sword Domain and Bastion. Kai had taken over the Song Domain and Ravenheart…

Morgan had spent those first few months there with him, helping the charming archer build a solid foundation for his future rule.

Then, she disappeared without a trace.

Sunny frowned.

"What about them?"

Morgan shrugged lazily.

"While you were busy conquering the world… well, Nephis was busy conquering the world. You were busy playing dead. Congratulations on your resurrection, by the way."

Sunny smiled.

"You don't sound that surprised."

Morgan deigned him with a scoff.

"Please. Learning that the comely Master I had knighted was the Lord of Shadows was a bit of a shock. Inferring that you did not really turn on Nephis or die by her sword was a piece of cake."

Sunny grimaced.

"Almost everyone else truly believes that I'm dead, you know?"

She shrugged.

"Everyone else is not me. Anyway… while the two of you were busy putting out countless fires and dealing with the fallout of the war, Mordret and I were busy doing something else. The King of Swords and the Queen of Worms had left certain things behind — things that very few people knew existed, and even fewer were in a position to retrieve."

Morgan sighed.

"Mordret plundered our father's secret inheritance while hunting down the members of the extended Valor family. I tried to intercept them and extend at least some measure of protection, but… you should know that man by now. He is elusive, indestructible, and utterly deadly. And I was not in the position to protect anyone,

really. I was busy trying to stay alive myself."

She remained silent for a few moments, then shook her head.

"So, I plundered pieces of Ki Song's inheritance instead. Her daughters got to most of it eventually, but I had the advantage of being in Ravenheart before they returned — due to being kidnapped by Nightingale."

Morgan paused, then asked in an indifferent tone:

"How… is he doing, by the way?"

Sunny smiled.

"Who, that guy? Oh, he's doing great. Better than anyone with a drop of shame would have the audacity to, really. He lives in a beautiful palace, surrounded by stunning Transcendent princesses from all sides. It's like a flower garden. What's not to love?"

Somehow, Morgan did not seem particularly glad to hear that.

'I guess she is still resentful of Kai because of the kidnapping.'

Sunny shook his head.

He knew a thing or two about spite, but some people were just too vindictive!

"So what was it that Ki Song left behind?"

Morgan remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged somberly.

"This and that. Information, among other things. For example, she left behind a piece of information I was aiming to find, to begin with. I knew that Mordret would come for me sooner or later… I also knew that Ki Song would have never accepted him into the Song Domain without investigating possible countermeasures against his betrayal first. Turns out, she managed to learn more about my brother than even our father had."

She smiled faintly.

"Our father tried to obliterate Mordret quite thoroughly, you know. His body was destroyed… his soul was destroyed, too. But he still refused to die, maybe because his reflections remained intact. In the end, all we could do was imprison him in a mirror trap. Well, as it turns out…"

Morgan looked out the window at the vista of the Mirage City and exhaled slowly.

"Turns out, he couldn't be killed because his death was somewhere else. My brother Mordret was split apart when he conquered the First Nightmare. Different versions of him inherited different parts of his being... and only one of them inherited his death."

She raised a hand and pointed at the lights of the sprawling city.

"He must have brought that version to the Great Mirror after returning to Bastion, and hid him inside."

Morgan turned to Sunny and smiled.

"So, you see… if we kill the CEO of the Valor Group, we can finally be rid of my dear brother once and for all."

Chapter-2497: The Ones Who Walk Away

Hearing that, Saint finally looked away from the vista of the drowning city outside the window. She stared at Morgan coldly for a few moments, then turned to glance at Sunny.

A faint crease appeared on her brow.

Even if she did not say anything, Sunny could imagine what she was thinking…

'Enough is enough. Be happily crazy together all you want, but if you start discussing plans of assassinating someone, I am calling the police!'

'...Wait. He is the police.'

Sunny cleared his throat and focused on the road.

'She is not wrong.'

He remained silent for a while, then asked in a neutral tone:

"Is that how you ended up locked in an asylum? You tried to kill the other Mordret?"

Morgan pursed her lips, then let out a sigh.

"Yes. Sadly, I failed."

Her expression grew a little wistful.

"Ki Song might have found out about my brother's Flaw and where he had hidden it, but she did not know a lot about the Great Mirror, let alone about what is hidden on its other side. So, finding myself in

Mirage City was quite a… novel experience. Suddenly becoming mundane again was a difficult transition, as well."

Morgan looked at her hands.

"Plus, I was severely wounded while trying to sneak past the Cursed Demon you had deposited in True Bastion. Soul damage, mental damage… you name it. I was in rough shape, and Mordret — the real Mordret — was on my heels. So, I might have acted a little hasty."

Her expression soured.

"Killing the most powerful man in Mirage City as a mundane person turned out to be more difficult than I expected. He is protected incredibly well, with an army of bodyguards following him day and night — both in plain view and hidden. Well, anyway, he survived. I thought I'd be disposed of right there and then, but he must have grown attached to my false self… he looked quite distressed, even."

Morgan scoffed.

"You'll find it hard to believe, but I did not end up in that mental hospital because he wanted to get rid of me quietly. There were no nefarious reasons behind his decision to commit me to a psychiatric facility whatsoever — rather, he seemed to harbor genuine hope that I would be fixed and return to how my counterpart was before."

She shook her head.

"That guy… something is not right with him. He is not quite as twisted as the real one, but he is definitely not entirely there."

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"You do remember that you just escaped from a mental hospital? Should you really be going around calling people insane?"

Morgan chuckled.

"Fair."

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"You seem to have escaped quite easily, though. I suspect that you could have left that place whenever you wanted. So why did you stay?"

She shrugged.

"Because for a while, it was the safest place for me to be. The other Mordret might have spared me, but the real one was still out there, determined to finish what he had started during the Battle of the Black Skull. I was laying low and gathering information about Mirage City… until my fortress suddenly wasn't that safe anymore. It was time to leave."

Sunny frowned.

"Wait, but how did you regain your sense of self, to begin with? There was no Effie around to make you remember. Was it because you were the ruler of Bastion, at some point?"

Morgan smiled, then shook her head.

"No… it was because I killed my reflection a long time ago."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She chuckled.

"Long before my Awakening, my father brought me in front of the Great Mirror — its false version in the illusory Bastion — and made me fight my reflection, until one of us was destroyed. That is why this place has a weaker hold on me than it had on you. I suspect that my brother is the same."

'Huh.'

Sunny smiled darkly.

'And I thought I couldn't despise Anvil any more.'

He lingered for a while, then shook his head.

"Anyway, we can't kill the other Mordret. At least not yet."

Morgan pierced him with a sharp look.

"And why is that?"

He hesitated for a while, trying to put his thoughts into words.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"Well, first of all… he has been living here for the past two decades. And from the looks of it — and believe me, I can't quite believe I'm saying it — this version of Mordret seems like a nice guy. He's an innocent bystander, so what right do we have to kill him?"

Morgan laughed.

"Wait, what is this? Are you really giving me the 'world is not worth saving if the price of saving it is a tear of an innocent child' speech? Hey. This is Mirage City, not Omelas, and you are the Lord of Shadows, not Ivan Karamazov. It's a nice sentiment… how very noble of you, wanting to spare him. I'm in awe. But will you take responsibility when the next House of Night massacre happens?"

Sunny frowned.

"Oh, please... don't pretend like you care about what happened to the House of Night — gods know your own hands are not exactly clean either. You've committed your own share of despicable deeds, Princess of Valor."

He sighed.

"But I see your point. Not that I know what Omelettes and… I can't even pronounce the second one… you're talking about, mind you. No need to swing your Legacy education around, okay? In any case, why would I take responsibility for something your crazy brother does?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Anyway, that is not the real reason why we can't kill the other Mordret. He has to stay alive because he is the axis of Mirage City.

This whole place has been created by the Castellan — the chief reflection who serves as the custodian of the Great Mirror — to suit his fantasies. Even if there are foreign influences twisting the fabric of Mirage City now, its foundation is still what your other brother has imagined."

He looked at the city lights flying past the window of the PTV and grimaced.

"Do you see the problem here? Whose imagination will become the foundation of this illusory realm if the other Mordret is removed? Will it be you, me? Do you even know what kind of horrors dwell in our imagination, Morgan? I don't know about you, but I've seen things so harrowing that merely witnessing them will instantly shatter the minds and extinguish the souls of mundane people. And I have quite an active imagination on top of that."

Sunny let out a joyless laugh.

"Imagination seems like a whimsical power — a sweet and fanciful power that makes dreams and fantasies come true. But when you think about it, it is perhaps the most terrifying thing in existence. Because one can imagine horrors, too… and unlike reality, imagination has no limits."

Mirage, the Demon of Imagination, had always seemed obscure when compared to her more prominent siblings, so Sunny never really considered her that deeply. He did not know a lot about her, either.

But now that he was inside her abandoned palace, he was starting to suspect that she had been no less sinister and frightening — perhaps much more so — than the rest of the daemons.

No wonder the moon itself had to be shattered just to bring down her castle.

He shook his head.

"The point is, we do not even know how to escape the Great Mirror. Effie does not have full control of the Palace of Imagination because the damn Castellan has gone rampant and usurped the role of the

Castle Master. So, until we find the Castellan and deal with it, the other Mordret has to stay alive."

Sunny glanced at the rearview mirror, looking into Morgan's glowing vermilion eyes.

"We'll decide what to do with him then. Understood?"

Morgan remained silent for a while, then scoffed.

"Well, if you put it like that…"

She paused and shivered visibly.

"Yeah. Let's keep him alive, for now. We… we can't risk letting Athena's imagination run wild in this place. That simply cannot happen, no matter what…"

Chapter-2498: Detective Story

"Where are we going, anyway?"

Morgan looked out of the window at the blurry outlines of the old buildings, with plumes of foaming water escaping from the rusty drainpipe spouts. The gutters were drowning and gargling, unable to swallow the rainwater fast enough — this part of the city was one of the poorer ones, with many houses standing empty and abandoned, condemned for renovation.

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then answered in a neutral tone:

"Somewhere we can regroup and plan what to do next without worrying about being killed by random passersby."

By now, he was starting to understand how the Palace of Imagination operated. It was designed to bring fantasies to life — fantasies that belonged to the Castle Master, to be precise. However, the wondrous mechanisms of this impossible place were broken and in a state of disrepair, having surrendered to the ruthless burden of time in the absence of their creator.

The Castellan was one such faulty mechanism. It was more of a function than a being, and that function had gone rogue. It had usurped the authorities of the Castle Master — not for a selfish or nefarious purpose, but simply in an attempt to keep faithfully performing its duty. To make the imagination of those who visited the Great Mirror a reality.

The Castellan was failing, though.

Things must have been stable when the only human residing in the Palace of Imagination was the other Mordret. The Castellan had created Mirage City and took care of that abandoned human child…

the only real person in the city of reflections. That was why Mordret had been able to survive and grow up into a semblance of a sane man.

However, now there were more humans in the Palace of Imagination, and all their complicated human wishes and emotions were clashing against each other.

The Castellan was slowly coming undone under the contradictory input it was receiving from the uninvited guests, and Mirage City was coming undone with it.

So… like any living being, Mirage City was trying to protect itself.

That was why every real person within its bounds had faced life-threatening situations as of late. At first, it was just Mordret, who had been hunted by the Nihilist — a serial killer who did not really exist, and was instead a collective manifestation of the city's deadly will.

But now that Sunny, Effie, and Saint were added into the mix, the ways in which Mirage City was trying to deal with them were becoming more sophisticated.

Sunny noted it while fighting the thugs who had accosted Saint. They weren't random people whom the Castellan had taken control of and sent to kill her — otherwise, they would not have come prepared and armed with the tools of their dirty trade. They would not have known her name and her background… they would not have been able to talk at all.

Instead, they would have been no different from the glassy-eyed zombies whom the inhabitants of Mirage City seemed to turn into when someone nearby was acting out of character.

The same could be said about the four hired killers who had infiltrated the mental asylum and come to kill Morgan, disguised as staff members. And Sunny had a feeling that the assassin who had broken into his apartment was the same.

And that… that was enough for him to make conclusions about the way Mirage City was trying to get rid of them.

It was just as the real Mordret had said. Unlike reality, the Palace of Imagination was a place capable of being changed not only proactively, but also retroactively. There had not been a Nihilist before, but now that Sunny and Effie were walking the streets of Mirage City, there was. There always had been, even — the past was changed to fit the present.

And judging by what happened tonight, it had not been changed randomly.

'The Castellan is building a… story.'

The Castellan was struggling to keep the grand illusion intact, so it tried to remove the foreign irritants in a way that compromised the integrity of Mirage City the least. In other words, whoever wanted to kill Sunny, Saint, Effie, Morgan, and Mordret had to have the means, motive, and opportunity that fit the internal logic of Mirage City.

Even if this mysterious culprit had not existed yesterday, they did today — they had existed today.

Which meant that the mystery could be solved. The culprit could be found and neutralized…

With some good old-fashioned detective work.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"First, we need to ensure our safety. Then, we need to find our enemy and crush them. And then…"

He lingered for a few moments.

That was where true difficulty lay. The culprit, whoever they were, was merely a symptom of the problem, not the problem itself. Finding and dealing with them would buy Sunny and his companions time, but it would not solve the fundamental issue.

Whom they really needed to find was the Castellan.

A single reflection in a city of twenty million Others.

How the hell were they supposed to discover it?

Sunny sighed.

"Then, we will think of something."

The PTV stopped near one of the abandoned buildings. This one was larger and more imposing than the rest of the houses surrounding it, albeit just as forlorn and decrepit.

It was an old church.

Looking at it through the windshield, Sunny sighed.

"What is it with me and ruined cathedrals…"

It seemed that he was a magnet for dilapidated temples, just like Kai was a magnet for dragons.

Immediately after dealing with the assassin and clashing with Mordret, Sunny had contacted Effie to warn her about a possible attack. They briefly discussed a few things, including the need to find a shelter — this church was the location they chose.

This entire neighborhood was scheduled for renovation, so it was mostly cleared out in preparation for the initial round of demolition. However, the director of the company contracted by the city to perform the costly project… ended up becoming one of the Nihilist's victims.

The works stalled, and the empty neighborhood ended up in a state of limbo. Very few people still resided here, and even fewer visited, since this area was out of the way of everything. So, it was a perfect spot for a hideout.

"Let's go. We'll be… we should be safe here."

He opened the door and climbed out of the PTV first. Saint and Morgan followed.

Just then, bright headlights ignited in the darkness, illuminating the falling torrents of rain and nearly blinding them.

Another PTV was parked in the shadow of the decrepit church, all but invisible in the rain. Its door opened, and a tall figure stepped out into the light.

A black umbrella opened with a quiet sound.

…Holding the umbrella with one hand and a half-eaten donut with the other, Effie gave Sunny and his companions a placid look.

Then, she grinned.

"Hey, Morgan. Hey…"

Her gaze landed on Saint, and her eyes widened.

"You... w—who the hell are you?"

Sunny sighed.

"This is Saint. My Shadow."

Effie stared at him with a stunned expression.

"You mean that this… this is the fearsome onyx knight that always follows you around? This gorgeous creature?!"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Yes? Oh, right… you never saw her without a helmet. I forgot."

Effie opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

"Does Nephis know?!"

He raised an eyebrow, confused.

"Know what?"

Effie stared at him for a few more moments, then closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Never mind… let's go inside, I'm freezing."

She could not help to steal another glance at Saint, though.

Well, Sunny could not blame her. Saint had been made in the image of Storm God, after all.

It was not every day that one got to behold the face of a goddess...

Chapter-2499: Playing with Water

The interior of the church was just as dilapidated as its exterior. The roof was not leaking, at least — that was a relief, considering that they were going to have to spend some time here.

There was surprisingly little dust, too. A wide open space led to an ornate altar, with rows of benches covered in white fabric. Above it all, tall stained-glass windows were shimmering dimly with the pale light of electric street lamps.

The dark expanse of the abandoned church was illuminated with colorful radiance because of it.

Sunny did not mind the forlorn ambiance and the poignant feeling of lost sanctity. He quite liked decrepit temples, actually… visiting one made him feel nostalgic.

Morgan, however, seemed a little surprised.

She looked around with curiosity, then shook her head.

"This is not right."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What is?"

She gestured to the altar and the stained-glass windows above it.

"This church. The iconography does not match any of the religions that would have been widespread before the Dark Times. At least none that I recognize."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

He did not really know a lot about religion — few people did, in the world of the Nightmare Spell.

It was hard to believe in anything after learning that the gods did exist, but were dead. The government had spent decades discouraging worship of any kind, as well. Maybe it was because various cults had caused a lot of trouble for the First Generation, both the government and the Legacy Clans wanted people to seek spiritual fulfillment in things other than mystical beliefs.

It was only now that Nephis had ascended to Supremacy that worship was once again spreading among the population — in more senses than one.

Nephis and the Fire Keepers were dealing with people who were starting to worship the Immortal Flame and its last daughter, while Sunny and the Shadow Clan were busy dealing with the doomsday cults that kept sprouting from the ground like mushrooms after the rain.

In any case, he had only a very vague impression of what religions were being exercised during the Dark Times, let alone before them.

"What, are you an expert on ancient religions, too?"

Morgan gave him a wry smile.

"You told me not to swing my Legacy education around."

Sunny coughed.

"Oh… yes, I did."

He looked around.

"So what's wrong with this church?"

Come to think of it…

He frowned.

It was only now that he noticed that there were tall mirrors artfully

installed here and there around the church. Their masterful placement made it so that endless kaleidoscopes of reflections stretched into infinity, catching the light falling from the stained-glass windows and making the interior of the church seem many times larger than it was.

It would have looked wondrous and beautiful… if not for his memories of the Mirror Maze that made Sunny's skin crawl.

'I hate mirrors.'

Morgan shrugged.

"It's just… anachronistic? I'm not sure if that word really fits. The point I am trying to make is that there would not have been a church like this one on Earth, in this period of time. The outward symbology of temples and churches of Mirage City is quite consistent with historic records, though, so I find it strange."

At that moment, Saint, who had kept silent for the longest time, finally let her voice be heard.

Looking at them in exasperation, she asked:

"What are you talking about? This is a church dedicated to Mirage. There are thousands of them around the city."

Sunny, Morgan, and Effie all looked at her in confusion.

He tilted his head a little.

"Mirage? The Demon of Imagination?"

Saint seemed similarly confused.

"Who else?"

Sunny scratched the tip of his nose.

'Oh… so the name of the city is not just a coincidence.'

From what he could tell, Mirage City was a faithful reproduction of a

human settlement from before the Dark Times. This church was the first obvious discrepancy they found — a foreign concept in an otherwise meticulous imitation of a mundane city on Earth.

He was suddenly very curious.

"Why would people worship a daemon, though?"

Saint remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Who knows? I am not a religious person myself. It is an important part of our cultural heritage, though, so one should naturally be familiar with it."

She gave Sunny a reproachful look.

"Obviously, there is no reliable evidence to prove that Mirage actually existed, let alone that she wielded miraculous powers — let us not even mention the deeper meaning people put into the stories of her supposed deeds. However, it is easy to gather that she is at least based on a real historical figure from circumstantial data."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What data?"

Saint looked at him with reproach.

"It is the existence of Mirage City itself, of course. A thriving settlement could not have been founded here without the system of dams that make its existence possible. These dams have existed in some form or fashion for thousands of years… obviously, they have been modernized and renovated countless times — the latest iteration of the northern dam was just renovated by the Valor Group, for example — but if myths are to be believed, it was Mirage who designed and built the dams first."

She looked around the church with a hint of reverence in her eyes.

"If so, then even if she did not possess any miraculous powers, she must have been a true genius. It is a stunning feat, to have constructed something so grand and advanced all those years ago...

the dams of Mirage City are not considered one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world for nothing. Even if Mirage is a collective persona of several generations of architects and engineers, it is still impressive."

Sunny smiled faintly.

It was interesting how the fictional mythology of Mirage City somewhat reflected the reality of the Dream Realm. Bastion itself had been surrounded by great dams once, after all.

Rivergate had withstood the apocalypse and the passage of time, only to end up being destroyed by Morgan and Mordret — albeit it was already being rebuilt by the forces of humanity, including Beth and Rain. The northern dam had been obliterated eons ago, though. In fact, Sunny had only learned of its existence by chance, when Effie mentioned finding its remains in True Bastion.

Its ruins in the False Bastion were gone. Perhaps humans had not discovered them yet, or perhaps they had simply been obliterated when the mortal realms were devoured by the Dream Realm. In any case, there was no twin Citadel to Rivergate to be found anywhere.

Neither Sunny nor Effie had known for sure that it was Mirage who had built the dams surrounding the Mirror Lake, though, just like she had built Bastion.

Maybe "built" wasn't the right word — considering that he was thinking of the Demon of Imagination, she might have simply imagined them, and then made her fantasy real.

It was fascinating, though…

"But why would the Demon of Imagination be so interested in building dams?"

Saint seemed to be a little confused by the question.

She hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"You will receive different answers from different people. If you follow the religious dogma, though… she built them to create

mirrors."

Chapter-2500: Her Reflection

Sunny blinked a few times.

"The Demon of Imagination created a system of huge dams… to produce mirrors?"

Saint shook her head.

"Not produce mirrors. To create mirrors."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What is the difference?"

While Saint considered the answer, Sunny looked around the dark church once again, noting the infinity mirrors stretching into the endlessness all around him. The colorful radiance of the stained-glass windows was trapped in them, creating beautiful kaleidoscopes. It was indeed a whimsical and beautiful sight worthy of the Demon of Imagination… and yet, Sunny could not see how Mirage and mirrors were connected.

He knew that there was a connection, though. There had to be.

After all, True Bastion was hidden in the reflection of the illusory Bastion, and two Great Mirrors — the real one and its reflection — were at the heart of two great castles. True Bastion was contained within the false Great Mirror, while the Palace of Imagination was contained within the true one.

And that was where the Others came from.

As far as Sunny knew, there was no other place in the Dream Realm where one could encounter the Others. At least he had not encountered such a nightmarish region yet.

So, it was hard to argue with the fact that there was a strange bond between Mirage, mirrors, and the Others.

But what was it?

Finally, Saint found the right words:

"According to myth, Mirage created mirrors. As in… she did not simply craft one, or even the first one — she crafted the very concept of reflections, and allowed the world to see itself for what it was. That is why other deities disliked and shunned her… because she showed them the most cruel sight of all. She showed them the truth of what they looked like, and of what they were."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Effie was busy carrying boxes out of the trunk of her car, while Morgan was staring at her reflection with a peculiar expression on her pale face. So, he was the only one left to ask questions:

"What do you mean, crafted the concept of reflections? That does not make any sense. What did the world look like before she invented mirrors, then? Were there no reflective surfaces anywhere at all?"

That sounded quite preposterous.

But then again…

That was a daemon he was talking about. Hope had invented the concept of writing, while Nether had created a whole race of living beings.

...Weaver had created the Nightmare Spell.

So who was to say that Mirage could not have invented the concept of reflections?

Saint shrugged.

"This is a myth, after all. Myths do not need to follow logic or reason… at least not the kind of logic or reason we would recognize as such. It all seemed perfectly reasonable to people who invented

these myths, though."

She looked into one of the mirrors decorating the church.

"According to myth, Mirage was sad and lonely one day. She could imagine anything in the world, but she could not imagine herself. So, she decided to make something out of nothing to do what she could not, and entertain herself."

Saint pointed to her reflection.

"So, Mirage found a place where water flowed across the mountains and created a series of dams and complicated lock systems. That was how the Mirror Lake was born, even if it was not called that back then yet. The Mirror Lake was vast and perfectly flat. Its surface was meant to become the first mirror."

Sunny could not help but blink a few times.

'Huh.'

So that was the secret of the great dams and vast artificial lakes Mirage had created?

Those lakes… were simply gargantuan mirrors of her making?

The first mirrors to ever exist.

That definitely gave the name of the Mirror Lake a new meaning.

'Leave it to daemons to do everything on a completely ridiculous scale.'

"So what happened next?"

Saint looked at him evenly.

"According to one myth, she took mist from a distant mountain chain and trapped it in the water. Strange creatures dwelled in that mist, and they became trapped in the lake, too — those creatures were shapeless and only existed when one looked at them, but she bent them into taking the shape of whoever looked into the water, and

whatever faced the water. The first thing the creatures beheld was the moon, and so, the first mirror was born when moonlight touched the surface of the lake."

She sighed.

"According to a different myth, she trapped nothing in the water, and imprisoned nobody in the lake. But when the moon rose above the world at night, Mirage imagined touching it, and so, nothing became something, giving birth to the first reflection. In any case, after that, the creatures created by the Demon of Imagination out of nothing spread, eventually populating all of existence. It is just that they dwell in a place between somewhere and nowhere — the Mirror Realm — and rarely come in contact with the real world."

Sunny stared at her with wide eyes.

'Wait… why does that… make sense?'

If he were indeed to believe that Mirage created the very concept of reflections, then she would have needed building blocks to realize her grand design. The mist from a distant mountain chain… that had to have been pure nothingness from the Hollow Mountains.

Sunny had noted once that the Nothing Creatures and the Others were alike, in some regard. After all, the Nobodies only came into existence when they were perceived by someone. Similarly, reflections only took shape when one stood in front of a mirror — if there was nothing to reflect, the mirror remained empty.

The Others thrived on being witnessed, too.

So wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that the Nothing Creatures and the Others… were kin?

It was just that the former were wild and untamed, while the latter were domesticated and reshaped by the Demon of Imagination, becoming a closely related, but entirely new kind of beings.

Like wolves and dogs.

Mirage had first created the Others in the Mirror Lake, and from

there, they spread everywhere, until mirrors and reflections were commonplace throughout existence. As if an addition was made to the universal laws forming it.

Building an entire new concept on top of the universal laws of existence. That… would indeed have been an accomplishment worthy of a daemon.

Saint smiled faintly.

"Mirage beheld herself and surrounded herself with reflections. So, she wasn't sad or lonely anymore."

Sunny shivered.

'The great taboo placed upon the daemons by the gods.'

Daemons had been prohibited from siring offspring, and many — perhaps most of them — had tried to rebel against that prohibition in one way or another. Weaver had created the Lineage, Nether had created the Stone Saints, Hope had settled among humans and nurtured them, Ariel had raised the Jade Queen…

So what had Mirage done?

Had she created the Others, populated her Palace of Imagination with them, and enjoyed their companionship to lessen her solitude?

If so, then the Palace of Imagination might not have been merely a daemon's playground…

It might have been a place where her own fantasy had come true.

Chapter-2501: Hidden in Reflections

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking about Mirage and her whimsical kingdom. A land of towering dams, sprawling forests, lakes that glistened under the sun, and illusory castles that drifted upon the bed of reflected clouds… a place where fantasies came true.

A playground populated by beings she had imagined to cure her solitude and entertain her.

Sunny thought about how it had ended up, as well.

A broken sky, a shattered moon. A great castle that lay in ruins, and a drowned city hidden at the bottom of an abominable lake, with countless bones buried in the silt.

The only untainted things that remained of the Demon of Imagination were the illusory simulacrum on her beautiful citadel and the imaginary palace hidden in the reflections.

The former had been usurped by the Nightmare Spell and fashioned into a great stronghold for the Awakened, while the latter… the latter was slowly falling apart, having been left without a master for too long.

Sunny sighed.

He had always loved unraveling the ancient mysteries of the Dream Realm… but at some point, delving deeper into its dark past became intertwined with a sense of wistful melancholy.

Perhaps it was because he had become so much more powerful now. The protagonists of those ancient stories were not as distant and unreachable as they had seemed once… the gods, the daemons. Now

that Sunny was halfway to becoming a deity himself, he could not perceive them as vast, faceless forces of nature anymore.

He could relate to their woes and sorrows, somewhat, and therefore was unable to deny their personhood.

'Should I really be feeling sorry for them, though?'

Those bastards were the ones who had ruined the world, after all. They were to blame for turning all of existence into a graveyard.

But no matter how Sunny tried, he could not bring himself to hate the deities of bygone eras. Their fate was already tragic, and their ends were already bitter enough. It was all one big mess of cosmic proportions, and that mess was too distant and too vast for him to care about it personally.

"A wonderful lecture."

Morgan had approached him and Saint at some point, and chose that moment to speak.

"I did not know. It is strange, really, how little we knew about Bastion — my grandfather had conquered it, after all, and my father ruled it for decades. I guess it was only to be expected, though, considering how wary both of them were of the Great Mirror. They spent decades guarding against it instead of trying to unravel its mysteries… I can't help but wonder if things would have been different if they were more curious."

Effie, who had brought the last box from the trunk of her PTV — or rather, her family PTV — placed it on the floor and shook off drops of water from her shoulders.

"Of course, things would have been different."

She looked at Morgan and smiled.

"Your grandfather, your daddy, and you would have been replaced by the Others decades ago. I hate to admit it, but let's give credit where credit is due… if there was one thing Anvil did right, it was keeping the Great Mirror covered at all times. As the current ruler of Bastion,

that is precisely what I am doing, too."

Morgan gave her a dark look, then shrugged.

"...Fair enough."

Sunny interrupted them in a neutral tone:

"That is great and all, but shall we get down to business? Effie…"

He gestured to Saint, who seemed to have tensed as a result.

"Will you do the honors?"

It was sort of fun to see this side of his taciturn Shadow, but Sunny needed his trusted general more than he wanted to have fun. So, they needed to make Saint remember who she was sooner rather than later.

Having her going around while believing that she was a human, and a psychiatrist from before the Dark Times at that, was not only of little use, but also a hindrance.

Of course... there was a risk in making Saint remember, as well. Sunny did not know how she would behave after regaining her memories, but while still trapped in the body of a mundane human. Becoming mundane had been quite a shock for him, after all, and Saint was not even of the same species.

Living as a human would be an entirely alien experience to her. Would she still be able to play the role of Dr. Saint? If not, they would have an entirely different problem on their hands.

Nevertheless... there was a lot of irony in the fact that Saint would have to experience what being a human felt like not long after Sunny had experienced being a Stone Saint.

In any case, the benefits outweighed the risks.

Effie stared at him for a bit, then sighed.

"Excuse me."

With that, she placed a hand on Saint's shoulder and looked into her eyes.

"Hey… Saint, was it? Snap out of it."

The beautiful therapist looked up at her silently.

Nothing happened for a few moments…

And then, her expression changed subtly. Her eyes widened slightly, and she seemed to hold her breath for a heartbeat or two.

A slight crease appeared on her brow.

She lingered for a while, then coughed.

"I am sorry? What am I supposed to snap out of?"

Effie blinked a few times and glanced at Sunny before turning back to Saint.

"Uh… come to your senses? Pull yourself together? Get a grip!"

Saint stared at her for a while, then raised a hand and deliberately pushed Effie's away.

Her eyes glistened with a barely suppressed emotion, and Sunny could hear the sound of teeth grinding against each other.

Saint exhaled slowly, then inhaled deeply and closed her eyes for a few moments.

Opening them again, she said in an even tone:

"Isn't that what I should be telling you three?"

She paused for a moment, and then added in a low voice:

"...Damnation."

Chapter-2502: Foundation of Health

Effie looked at Sunny with a confused expression.

"It… does not seem to be working?"

Sunny was just as stumped.

He gave Saint a thoughtful glance, then scratched the back of his head.

"Well. Yeah… maybe it is because she is not a complete person? As one of my Shadows, Saint is technically a part of me. She usually resides within my soul… and before you say anything about a beautiful woman being trapped in me, know that I will break at least one of your arms if you do…"

Effie, who had already opened her mouth with a mischievous glint in her eyes, closed it again.

Sunny glared at her for a moment, then continued:

"Alternatively… it might be because of her [Stalwart] Attribute, which makes her immune to mind attacks. Her Mirage City persona was forced upon her by the Palace of Imagination, so it is not a mental hex — rather, it is a manifestation of divine sorcery. So, your attempt to strip her of that persona might be seen as a mental assault instead, consciously or subconsciously."

He grimaced.

"Or it could be something else entirely. Maybe the Castellan had stolen more of your authority in the last few days. Maybe it only worked on me that easily because I am a Supreme. It's… hard to say."

Effie looked at him, then at Morgan. Morgan did not seem to know more about the Palace of Imagination than they did, though, so she looked back to Sunny.

"So what do we do?"

He had no idea.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then opened his mouth to say something. At that moment, though, Saint shook her head and turned away with a determined expression.

He panicked a little.

"Uh, sorry? What are you doing, Saint?"

She looked around the church, then said evenly:

"I am going to sleep."

Saint headed to the nearest bench and pulled the white sheet off it, grimacing because of the dust.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"You're going… to sleep? Now?"

She turned around and pierced him with a chilling gaze.

"It is far past my bedtime, and as I mentioned, my sleep schedule is very important. Good sleep… is the foundation of mental health. And since delusional disorders seem to have become infectious as of late, somehow, I must be vigilant."

Her tone was letting them know that she would tolerate no compromises.

Whipping around, Saint took off her coat, rolled it into a makeshift pillow, and settled on the bench. Soon enough, her figure was hidden under the white sheet.

It was as if she was telling them that she refused to deal with their

nonsense anymore, at least not tonight.

Sunny, Morgan, and Effie stared in her direction with stunned expressions.

"Is she really… going to sleep? Now?"

There was a hint of amusement in Morgan's voice.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then cleared his throat.

"Well, you heard her. Proper sleep… is the foundation of mental health."

Honestly, he could understand Saint's reaction.

First, she had met him and was exposed to a bunch of nonsense that sounded completely delusional. Then, someone tried to kill her. Then, Morgan broke out of the mental hospital after someone tried to kill her, too — not only that, but she seemed to share in the delusions of the crazy detective.

And after all that, Saint met Effie. Who also went along with the insane antics of the delusional detective and the escaped mental patient.

She could write off what Sunny said, and she could even try to explain why Morgan was playing along — after all, both of them were her patients, which meant that their mental health was compromised by definition. But with the third person added into the mix…

When three people confidently insisted on something completely insane, making you the odd one out for trying to cling to normalcy, even the most stable person would have no choice but to start doubting their own sanity. Considering that Saint had just survived a brutal attack, it was no surprise that she needed a break.

Of course, Sunny had assumed that there would be no such problem because Saint would regain her memories.

But she had not.

Which posed a problem…

He frowned.

It was already bad enough not to have the full support of his fearsome Shadow. But in her current state, Saint was also vulnerable… and being hunted by Mirage City on top of that. Which meant that she needed to be protected.

The problem was that there was someone else who needed to be protected — the other Mordret. And Sunny could not be in two places at the same time.

'How inconvenient.'

Who could live like that? Only having one body was seriously so frustrating!

Letting out a sigh, he shook his head and looked at the boxes Effie had carried into the church from her PTV.

"Let's get to work. We'll need to change our plans a little."

Morgan glanced at the boxes and raised an eyebrow.

"What work are we talking about, exactly?"

Opening one of the boxes and pulling out a stack of documents, Sunny smiled faintly.

"What else? Detective work, of course."

He pointed to the documents.

"These are case materials Effie fetched while I was busy driving you and Saint around. Everything having to do with the Nihilist case, as well as everything we have gathered regarding the recent attempt on the other Mordret's life. We might not be able to find the culprit just yet, but we can at least narrow down the list of suspects. Maybe find a clue or two about who the Castellan is."

Morgan tilted her head a little, then nodded.

"Makes sense. Let's get to work, then."

She leaned down to open another box… and froze with a strange expression on her face.

"Huh."

Sunny glanced into the box and let out a heavy sigh.

There were no documents inside the box. Instead, it was filled to the brim with cartons of chocolate milk and packs of donuts.

"Effie… what the hell…"

She looked at him with an expression of hurt innocence.

"What? You told me to get food, in case we'll have to spend a lot of time in the hideaway."

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Food. I said food. Not dessert!"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then smiled.

"Oh, I brought food too!"

She pointed.

"That box. And that one. And that one as well…"

Sunny rubbed his temples and suppressed a groan.

'Maybe I should go take a nap, too…'

Chapter-2503: Anomaly

It seemed impossible, but Saint did actually fall asleep. In fact, it only took her a few minutes — five minutes exactly, actually — to fall into the embrace of sleep, almost as if there was a stopwatch built into her head.

Sunny was secretly impressed. He had heard that seasoned soldiers developed the ability to fall asleep on a dime, but never experienced it himself.

By the time Sunny joined the Southern Campaign, he had already become a Master. People he had spent most time with were Awakened, as well, and Awakened had a complicated relationship with sleep… especially so in Antarctica, where the Nightmare Gates opening everywhere had made it so that every time they fell asleep, they risked never waking up again.

He stared at the sleeping form of Saint, then shook his head and picked up a carton of chocolate milk.

"Anyway, let's arrange the… wow. Why is this so good? What was I... oh, right. Let's arrange the documents first."

Using the materials Effie had gathered, they unfolded a map of Mirage City on the altar and swiftly assembled a version of the investigation board hidden in the Devil Detective's wardrobe on its surface.

After studying it for a few moments, Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"There is a lot of information… but it should all be useless, no? Even I know that the Nihilist leaves no clues behind."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, it won't be useless. In fact, it will be quite useful. Because the situation has changed — even if there were no clues before, there will be now. We just need to find them."

Morgan shrugged.

"Alright."

Effie, meanwhile, studied the photos of the victims and asked in a dubious tone:

"There is something I don't understand, though. These people… they were all Mordret's vessels, right? But what were they here in Mirage City? Every one of them had a role to play, just like we play the roles of two police detectives. Did the Nihilist kill them because of their roles, or were they killed because they… were Mordret? How is that even possible? He should not have access to his Aspect here."

Sunny contemplated for a while, then answered in a hesitant tone:

"Maybe it's both."

He looked at the photos.

"First of all, I think I know why these people received roles in Mirage City. It is not very obvious, but when you think about it, something does not make sense. Where do all these people come from? The entire population of Mirage City, I mean. Not the Others themselves, but precisely the shapes they take."

He looked at Effie.

"Your counterpart knew that the Devil Detective went crazy when his former partner, the previous Homicide Division captain, was killed. That was the local version of Jet, by the way, but why? Jet has never entered the Great Mirror. Actually, Detective Sunless and Officer Athena had existed in Mirage City long before we arrived. How come?"

At that moment, Morgan spoke:

"I can explain that. I noticed more than a few familiar faces here, so I

considered this issue thoroughly, as well. And the conclusion I came to is that the Great Mirror uses the reflections of anyone who has ever set foot in Bastion as reference material… or maybe inspiration."

She pointed to the photos of the victims.

"Jet visited Bastion before, so her reflection ended up in Mirage City. So did you and Athena. So did I, for that matter. So, there were Others wearing our likeness in Mirage City."

Sunny nodded.

"That is what I suspected, as well. Then, here comes the interesting part. What if a person appears who has not one reflection, but many?"

Like Mordret.

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then pointed to himself.

"And a second question. What happens if a being whose consciousness inhabits several bodies enters the Great Mirror? I only sent one incarnation to Bastion, but what if all seven entered the Palace of Imagination?"

He sighed.

"And lastly… what happens when a person who already has an established role in Mirage City — who is its axis, no less — has an evil twin, and that evil twin suddenly enters the Great Mirror, too?"

Sunny chuckled darkly.

"I am willing to bet that the Castellan had no idea what to do with the real Mordret. Mordret is… an error, as far as the Castellan is concerned. So, it gave him a multitude of roles, and then arranged for all these people to be removed. The only one who did not receive a role, ironically enough, was our Mordret himself… gods. I just felt a little nauseated by having to call him 'our' Mordret."

He paused for a moment.

"Calling him the 'real' Mordret also does not work, either, since we don't know which one of them is real. So… what do we call them?"

Effie raised a hand with a smile.

"I know, I know! How about…"

Sunny hurriedly interrupted her:

"Anyway, let's call them Mordret and the Other Mordret. The point is, Mordret was not given a role, and that was how he was able to survive without being slain by the Nihilist. He is like a ghost — someone who does not exist in Mirage City, or at least is not supposed to exist. An anomaly."

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"But how does it help us catch the Nihilist?"

Sunny pointed to the investigation map.

"The Castellan killed every vessel of Mordret it could catch, but now that we are here, the story has been rewritten to give the killings a proper explanation. So now, they were killed both because they were Mordret and because something about their roles made them prime victim candidates for the Nihilist."

Effie blinked a few times.

"The serial killer… was retconned? Is that what you mean?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I guess? So, now, we can actually discover who the Nihilist is. In fact, we have quite a powerful advantage on our side, as far as detective work goes."

Morgan tilted her head a little.

"What advantage?"

He could not help but chuckle.

"Well… ironically enough, it is that we are not detectives."

He studied the investigation map and said in a measured tone:

"Everything in Mirage City has been changed to fit the new story, you see. The truth of what happened, the details of the identities of the victims, the evidence, the autopsy reports…"

Looking up from the map, he raised a hand and tapped his temple with a finger.

"The only thing that did not change is us, real people. And that is why we are actually in a great position to solve this case."

Sunny pointed to the documents.

"Because we had studied the case before its story was changed. So, we don't really need to search for a needle in a haystack. We don't need to parse through all this information to find the smallest hint of a clue."

He smiled.

"We just need to find what has changed compared to how these documents were before. That is how we will learn what story the Castellan is telling."

Chapter-2504: When Life Gives You High-Fructose Corn Syrup

Just like every day, Saint woke up before dawn broke.

However, she did not feel refreshed and well-rested, like she usually would. Instead, she felt tired, dazed, and hurting all over.

That was because she did not wake up in her comfortable, state-of-the-art orthopedic bed. Instead, she woke up on the hard surface of a church bench. Her luxurious cotton percale bedding was nowhere to be seen, either, replaced by a single dusty sheet of cheap and coarse fabric… naturally, her carefully selected pillow was also gone, supplanted by a rolled-up trench coat.

She had even slept in her clothes.

…And only for a few hours.

'Unacceptable.'

Trying her best not to feel indignant, Saint sighed and sat up, rubbing her eyes.

'Ouch.'

Her bruised body hurt. The cuts on her fingers stung, as well — the handkerchief wrapped around them had turned brown from blood and was sticking unpleasantly to her skin.

She was dirty, disheveled, and… grumpy. She felt disgusting.

That did not happen often.

Saint looked around groggily.

Of course, her clean and quiet apartment was nowhere to be seen. Sadly, she was still in an abandoned church, in the company of two unhinged detectives and an escaped patient. They did not seem to have slept at all — instead, they were sitting around a makeshift table, discussing something in hushed voices.

The hum of their whispering felt jarring in the echoing silence of the empty church.

'Irritating.'

Saint sighed.

The morning was a time for exercise, personal hygiene, self-care, and nutrition…

'Oh, no.'

Saint could not exercise properly because her body was bruised and battered after the altercation with the three brutes. Putting strain on it would only exacerbate the damage.

Personal hygiene was also a victim of her circumstance. She did not have her cleanser lotion, exfoliating scrub lotion, hydrating shampoo, and balancing conditioner, let alone her skincare and haircare products… all she had access to was bottled water to wash her hands and face.

Letting out another grumpy sigh, Saint rose from the bench and did just that.

Anything was better than nothing…

While Saint was carefully unwrapping the handkerchief from her hand and rinsing the deep cuts, Detective Athena looked at her and smiled.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty! There's toothpaste and a spare toothbrush in that box over there. Enjoy!"

Saint gave her a long, somber look.

Some time later, she was done with trying — and failing — to make herself look presentable. Then, Saint was faced with another blow.

Naturally, she treated all matters having to do with nutrition seriously. But her balanced breakfast was a pipe dream, at the moment… instead, she was presented with the food supplies in one of the boxes.

A galore of ultraprocessed carbs, artificial additives, and chemical preservatives, all under a thick layer of high-fructose corn syrup.

It was basically poison.

'I can't eat that!'

Saint stared at the box with a lost expression, not knowing what to do.

Noticing her hesitation, Detective Athena smiled again.

"Oh, there are also some donuts left! Treat yourself!"

Looking at her smiling face, Saint felt something that she had never felt before.

…The desire to smack another human being right across their face.

Her eyes widened a little.

'I… am not okay.'

And whose fault was that?

Theirs!

Taking a deep breath, Saint counted to ten and then said politely:

"Thank you. But I am not hungry."

Picking up a bottle of water, she quenched her thirst and stayed motionless for a while.

Now that her morning ritual — or at least a version of it — was

complete, she could finally think about her situation.

Her mood only grew worse.

Someone had tried to kill her. She did not know who or why. There were detectives protecting her, but their mental state was questionable.

Morgan, the heiress of the Valor Group, had escaped from a secure mental hospital and was now here with her, acting as if nothing odd was happening.

So what was Saint supposed to do?

Going home seemed like an unwise decision, considering that someone was out to get her. Going to work was similarly problematic.

Relying on her rescuers…

She listened to what they were saying.

At that moment, Detective Sunless was shaking his head.

"It is still not enough. Sure, we determined that the past of the victims was changed to give them a connection to the Valor Group. The company of the guy who was supposed to renovate this neighborhood was a minor contractor for them, the young security guard was previously assigned to a different post, the older woman worked in an agency that provided outsourcing archival services for one of the Valor Group branches… but that is still not enough to pinpoint the exact culprit."

Detective Athena responded in a carefree tone:

"Yes, but if we add the attempted victims to the list — the CEO, two detectives who had been in contact with him, Morgan, and her psychiatrist — then the entire picture changes, doesn't it?"

Morgan shrugged.

"There is nothing in my counterpart's memory to easily explain why

she would be targeted. At least not on the surface — even if she knew something, I'd need to know what to look for first to find pertinent information."

Detective Sunless spoke again:

"There are very few issues that would require both the CEO and his sister to be taken out of the picture. An attempted coup? That doesn't make sense, though… even if both Mordret and Morgan disappear, the power will simply return to Anvil. We don't think that he's behind the Nihilist, do we? He's supposed to be out of the country, anyway."

Saint closed her eyes for a moment.

'Great. Now they think that I became collateral damage in some sort of power struggle within the Valor Group?'

She drank her water in silence, feeling miserable.

By then, the conversation had changed course.

"Whoever the culprit is, they won't stop trying. We need to be ready to defend ourselves… which can be more problematic than we think. We are mundane people at the moment, after all, and our mundane bodies are quite vulnerable. Do any of you know how to use this thing? I pilfered it from the highly skilled, deadly, armed assassin who had tried to kill me."

Morgan spoke next.

"No. I never trained with firearms, let alone antique ones."

Detective Effie chuckled.

"What's so difficult about it? You just point it at the enemy and press the trigger, right?"

Detective Sunless did not sound too sure.

"Well, I don't know. Their cars need to be fueled with flammable liquid, and their communicators only work half a day without being charged. Who knows what their guns use as ammunition?"

Frowning, Saint turned her head and then spoke evenly:

"This is a double-action, six-shot revolver… Smith and Wesson Model Ten. It uses thirty-eight caliber bullets. Also, don't point it at each other, please. You are detectives, so you should know how to follow basic gun safety."

Detective Sunless blinked a few times.

"Actually, I have no idea. I was near a lot of guns in the Evacuation Army, but I never even fired one, let alone trained to handle one."

Then, he smiled brightly.

"But you seem to know your way around a gun, Saint! Well, of course you do. After all, you are a weapon master."

Saint frowned.

What about her gave this bizarre man the impression that she knew how to handle a firearm?

Not that she didn't…

Pursing her lips, Saint remained silent for a moment, then said reluctantly:

"I do have a marksmanship certificate. I used to practice shooting to maintain a good level of hand-eye coordination."

He nodded a couple of times.

"Of course you did. Then, you keep it."

With that, he pushed the revolver into her hand.

Saint froze, startled.

"Excuse me?"

Detective Sunless smiled.

"You know, for self-defense. Next time someone tries to strangle you,

blow their brains out. Alright?"

Then, after thinking for a few moments, he added:

"Actually, blow their brains out before they try to strangle you. Yeah, that would be way better…"

Chapter-2505: Bold Solution

Saint seemed to hesitate before accepting the revolver, but then gave Sunny a reluctant nod. She checked the gun with precise and confident movements, making sure that it was loaded, then hid it in the pocket of her trench coat.

It was hard to tell if she felt safer with a weapon since her expression was almost always calm and placid, but Sunny hoped that she did.

Because he himself felt troubled.

Being mundane was already bad enough, but he was at least confident in his ability to overpower most enemies in a brawl. Now that firearms entered the picture, though, Sunny had to face his own mortality.

One bullet was enough to end his life.

'How… nostalgic.'

He was reminded of his youth in the outskirts of NQSC, where armed thugs had been like deities who wielded power over life and death at their fingertips. It was such a long time since Sunny had felt threatened by guns that he was having trouble adjusting to this new old reality.

"By the way, aren't we supposed to have those, as well?"

Effie's question made him scratch the back of his head.

"Right. As detectives, we have the right to carry firearms."

Sunny rummaged in the Devil Detective's memories for a few moments.

"But they are under lock and key back at the Police Department. We

can only take them out after providing a proper justification and filling out a bunch of forms."

Guns were a rarity in Mirage City, and even cops hesitated to use them. Still… perhaps it would be prudent to retrieve their own revolvers from the armory sooner rather than later, considering that random assassins were running around with them.

He sighed.

"Anyway… where were we?"

They had poured over all the available information last night, finding ways in which it was different from how it had been before. Luckily, Sunny had studied the investigation board in the Devil Detective's apartment at the start of their stay in Mirage City, so he knew what to look for.

What they had discovered was that the victims of the Nihilist were now connected to the Valor Group in subtle, but undeniable ways. The owner of a construction company, the archivist, the suspiciously affluent civil inspector…

All of them were tied to the Valor Group, either obviously or covertly.

In and of itself, that was a meaningless clue. After all, the Valor Group was too vast and influential — here in Mirage City, everyone was connected to it in one way or another.

However, that clue ceased to be meaningless when one factored in one vital detail — that these connections had been formed only recently, in the process of Mirage City rewriting itself to fit the story of how the Nihilist chose his victims.

It was because of how the stories of these people had changed that Sunny could deduce that their connection to Valor was the reason for their deaths, as opposed to a mere coincidence.

The root of the matter still evaded him, though. At best, he knew where to look for it.

Sunny grimaced.

"There are only a few hours left before we are supposed to start interviewing persons of interest in the Other Mordret's attempted assassination case. That can potentially shed more light on the identity of the culprit… that was the plan yesterday, at least. However, today, I think that our plans were too conservative."

Effie arched an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Sunny shrugged.

"The city was not trying to kill us yesterday, so we could take our sweet time. But there is a deadline now — quite literally. So, we need to hurry things along."

Morgan, who had changed out of the borrowed nurse uniform into a spare set of clothes Effie had kept in the car, looked at herself in displeasure. The sleeves of the hoodie she was wearing were obviously too long for her, and the hoodie itself looked way too baggy on her svelte body.

Pursing her lips, she rolled up the sleeves and let out a heavy sigh.

"How are we going to hurry them, exactly?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Well, no matter how you look at it, there is one person at the center of all of this. The source of Mirage City… Mordret. The Other Mordret, I mean."

Hearing that, Saint frowned slightly, but did not say anything. She removed the cap from the water bottle in her hands and brought it to her lips, taking a measured sip.

Sunny shrugged.

"So, let's kidnap him."

Saint spat out the water, coughed, and looked at him with wide eyes.

'Huh. She can make that expression, as well.'

Effie and Morgan remained more composed, but they seemed surprised, as well.

"Kidnap him?"

Sunny nodded simply.

"That is the easiest solution. Listen… we don't have a lot of time, and we have too many things to do. We need to catch the Nihilist, we need to protect Saint, we need to make sure that the Other Mordret survives — all the while staying alive ourselves. So, let's turn all these things into one thing."

He pointed to the altar of the abandoned church, where Mordret's photo lay at the center of the investigation map.

"We need to put him and Saint together to remove the need to split our forces for protecting them both in separate locations. We also don't know enough to find the Nihilist… so, let's make the Nihilist come to us instead. As long as we have the Other Mordret, whoever is trying to get rid of him will come for us, and that will be our chance to follow the traces back to the source."

Saint wiped her lips with the back of her hand and pierced him with a glare.

"Now, wait a moment…"

Morgan spoke then, interrupting her:

"He is already protected enough. He is the most protected person in the city. Believe me, I know — otherwise, I would have already killed him. So what good will kidnapping him do?"

Sunny shook his head.

"If the person pulling the strings is hidden within Valor, like the Other Mordret thinks, then his own security might represent the most

threat to him. The same people who are meant to protect him might become his executioners."

She frowned, but did not object to that line of reasoning immediately.

In that ensuing silence, Effie said with a dubious expression.

"That might be true, but they will still protect him from us. So, how are we even supposed to kidnap him?"

Sunny suppressed a smile, as if he had been expecting that exact question.

"Elementary, my dear Effie."

He walked over to Morgan, placed a hand on her shoulder, and grinned.

"We have his baby sister. I'm sure he's worried out of his mind right now… so, we just need to use Morgan as a lure."

Morgan looked at him in displeasure, while Effie smiled brightly.

"Oh, I see. Sure, that makes sense."

As the three of them gave each other calm looks, already thinking about the practical steps of what they needed to accomplish, Saint finally spoke again:

"Wait, hold on. Wait a second. We are not seriously planning to kidnap the CEO of the Valor Group, are we? That... that would be insane."

She fell silent then, hearing her own words, and sighed.

"Oh."

Sunny grinned.

"Don't worry. We'll only kidnap him a little..."

Chapter-2506: Behind Mirror Eyes

Standing on the balcony of the Valor manor, Mordret looked at the vast expanse of the Mirror Lake stretching in front of him. The sun was rising, and the tranquil waters were starting to glisten with a beautiful golden light. Far in the distance, the magnificent silhouette of the great castle rose from the golden glow, looking like something out of a fairy tale.

It was a beautiful sight, despite the hazy curtain of the falling rain obscuring it.

Mordret smiled, enjoying the view.

He drank his morning coffee in silence, not thinking about anything in particular. These quiet minutes at dawn were the only time he got to spend at peace — later in the day, he was always busy with work, solving urgent problems and interacting with countless people.

Those problems were engaging and enjoyable in and of themselves, but it was a different kind of pleasure.

By the time the exquisite ceramic cup in his hand ran dry, there was movement on the gravel road leading to the manor. Noticing a luxurious black car arriving at the manor, Mordret sighed quietly.

His expression changed, betraying a sense of melancholy for a moment. Then, it was replaced by his usual easy smile, and he left the balcony.

Still wearing his silk pajamas, soft slippers, and an exquisitely embroidered viridian robe, he left his room and descended to the first floor. The maids, valets, and Sebastian were nowhere to be seen — opening the door, he finally found them, assembled in two neat rows

outside the entrance with umbrellas in their hands.

"Good morning."

Picking up an umbrella himself, Mordret walked out to meet the arriving car. The door swung open before the chauffeur had the time to touch it, and an imposing man climbed out of it, wearing a stern expression.

The man was tall and broad-shouldered, with a lean but mighty physique. He had dark hair and a thick, dignified beard. The expression on his noble face was harsh and austere, and his grey eyes were as cold as tempered steel.

He looked around coldly, and his heavy gaze landed on Mordret.

The man remained silent for a few moments, studying him somberly.

Then, a wide smile split his chiseled face, instantly warming it up.

"Son!"

Mordret smiled, too, hiding his melancholy behind that smile.

"Dad."

Before he could say anything else, he was encased in a bear hug.

"Come here, brat. How long has it been since we last saw each other? You are still too skinny… Sebastian! What have you been feeding this guy?"

Indeed, it was none other than Anvil, Mordret's father.

"Where's mom?"

Anvil gave Mordret a conspiratorial smile and brought a finger to his lips.

"Shhh. She fell asleep on the way from the airfield. Don't wake her just yet."

Leaving the protection of Mordret's umbrella, he took a few steps

toward the lake and inhaled deeply.

"Ah. The stench… I missed it!"

Looking back, he grinned.

"Your mom and I have done some wonderful work in less fortunate places, and I wouldn't change it for the world. But nothing beats home, does it?"

Anvil turned back to the lake and chuckled, taking in the sight of the castle.

"Look at it, rising from the water. Just as magnificent as it has always been… well, maybe a little more magnificent now after the renovations are done."

Smiling wryly, he finally returned to stand under the umbrella.

"I hear the castle is opening to the public soon. Mirage Museum, huh? Was that your idea?"

Mordret nodded.

"Seemed sad, to just look at it from a distance. Always outside reach… and empty. Like a mirage. So, I thought I'd let people visit it and look around. Getting the city hall to cooperate took a lot of work, but you know how these things are."

Anvil nodded.

"I do. And hearing you say that… I'm happier than ever that I retired."

Throwing his head back, he laughed.

"Now, let's wake your mother up and go inside…"

His expression darkened a little.

"I am sorry we couldn't come back earlier, son. That stuff with your sister… you two had us very worried. If not for Madoc promising to

look after you and Morgan, we would have abandoned everything and returned immediately."

Mordret smiled faintly.

"Yes, Uncle was of great help. How about…"

At that moment, his phone rang.

Letting out a sigh, Mordret took it out of his pocket, looked at the screen, and accepted the call.

"Yes. What is the matter?"

He listened to whoever it was on the other side for a few moments, and then scowled.

"What? What do you mean, they lost her? What about…"

There was a muffled sound of a man's voice from the phone, and his expression became even more troubled.

"How is this possible? I was told that the hospital in question…"

After listening for a few more moments, he ended the call and remained motionless for a while, looking into the distance with a worried expression.

Sensing his son's unease, Anvil asked in a calm tone:

"What was that?"

Mordret flinched, then looked at his father silently.

Eventually, he took a deep breath and said:

"It was Uncle's assistant. Apparently, Morgan… she vanished. I don't know how this is possible, considering that the facility we chose for her was supposed to provide the best care around the clock, but I will find out."

Anvil studied him for a few moments, then sighed.

"That girl… I think I spoiled her too much. She really knows how to throw a tantrum! But before you blame your old man, remember that you spoiled her the most."

A pale smile appeared on Mordret's face.

"Of course I did. She is my little sister."

Anvil shook his head.

"Look at you, still covering for her. I heard that she really crossed the line this time… trying to hurt you? That is too much, even for her. Aren't you mad?"

Mordret tilted his head a little.

"Mad?"

He considered the question for a few moments.

"I'm never mad. I can't be mad."

Offering his father a smile, he handed him the umbrella and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'll have to go deal with that… hug mom for me? I'll be back for dinner."

Anvil nodded.

"Of course. Go do what you need to do… drag Morgan home, as well. I'll give her a stern talking to."

Mordret looked at him for a few moments, then turned away.

Out of Anvil's sight, his smile dimmed a little.

He lingered for a bit, then headed inside to change clothes.

Behind him, the waters of the lake were stirring, restless, as its surface was being pelted by the rain.

Chapter-2507: Return to the Scene of the Crime

Soon enough, Mordret was leaving the manor in one of his luxurious cars. It used to be that two escort vehicles were assigned to his security detail, but because of the recent incident, there were four of them now — one driving ahead, one guarding the rear, and two flanking his car from both sides.

The new chauffeur had not been vetted yet, so Mordret's assistant was behind the wheel for now.

"Where to, sir?"

Fastening his seat belt, Mordret contemplated for a few moments, then said in a somewhat tense tone:

"The… the hospital where Morgan was being kept. Let's get there as soon as possible."

The assistant nodded, accelerating slightly.

They drove along the lake shore for a while. The sun rose higher and higher, but the grey twilight enveloping Mirage City seemed to only grow dimmer — the stormy clouds fused into an impenetrable veil, discharging heavy torrents of rain ceaselessly. Still, Mordret could see the vague silhouette of the great castle towering above the water in the distance.

'I should check how the preparations for the grand opening of Mirage Museum are going.'

The opening was not going to happen for quite some time, though. For now, he had more pressing matters to worry about.

As if reading Mordret's thoughts, the assistant spoke from the driver's seat:

"Sir, I forwarded the flood prevention initiative report to your personal inbox, as requested. Things seem to be going well."

Mordret looked away from the window and stared ahead in confusion for a couple of moments. Then, he smiled faintly.

"Oh. Thank you."

Picking up a tablet from the mahogany desk built into the interior of the car, he accessed the report and immersed himself in reading. It was fortunate that he had a little work to do on the way… that way, at least, there was something to distract him from his worries.

'I wonder how long it will take to reach the hospital.'

Some of the roads were flooded, while others were congested. It was hard to say for sure.

After a while, Mordret sighed.

"This can't be right. Who checked these numbers?"

The assistant looked at him through the rearview mirror.

"Oh… I was surprised, too. However, Valor Construction had already been mobilizing its forces in preparation for the reconstruction contracts that would follow after the floods. And they seem to still have some surplus materials left after finishing up the dam restoration project — that was a big commission, as you know. They've been waiting for a new flagship project since then."

Mordret nodded.

"I see."

Then, he shook his head.

"Still, there must be a mistake in the report. Get me the original copy, on paper… oh, and let's order a minor audit of Valor Construction

while we're at it. We are going to be working closely with the city hall in the next few months, so it's better to prepare in advance and have all the numbers at hand."

The assistant nodded.

"I will arrange it, sir."

Mordret sighed and looked out the window once again.

So many things were happening. Nothing had been happening for a long while, and now, everything seemed to be happening at once.

The other was here. He actually came back.

Morgan was… behaving strangely.

And then, there were the detectives.

Actually, their presence…

'No, don't think about it. Don't.'

The assistant looked at him strangely.

"Did you say something, sir?"

Mordret offered him a pleasant smile.

"No. Let's hurry."

Soon enough, they arrived at the hospital. The water was rising in this part of town, close to the northern dam, but the barricade of sandbags surrounding the building seemed to be holding for now. Workers in yellow raincoats were still scurrying to reinforce it, some wading through the water to drag the new sandbags from a truck that had broken down on the flooded parking lot.

It was a lively scene. There was even a street musician playing a simple melody under a makeshift awning that the workers had raised.

"Please wait a few moments, sir. I'll find a dry place to park the car."

The escort vehicles stopped first, letting out a small crowd of bodyguards. The assistant opened the door and held up an umbrella. Climbing out of the car, Mordret looked around and headed toward the hospital with confident steps.

"Oh. Go give that musician some change, and order hot meals and coffee to be delivered to the workers."

The assistant disappeared with a bow.

Entering the lobby, Mordret stumbled a little, and looked ahead with a stunned expression.

There were two people waiting for him. The director of the hospital, he knew. Next to him, however…

Mordret was more or less the most powerful and wealthy man in Mirage City. Due to the nature of his position, he had met and interacted with most of the local prominent figures — politicians, titans of industry, spiritual leaders… and the brightest stars of the art world, as well: actors and actresses, runway models, brilliant idols of the musical stage…

But he had never once seen anyone as beautiful as the woman standing silently next to the hospital director.

Mordret had really considered himself immune to being stunned by someone's beauty, but at the moment, he found it hard to hide his shock.

'W—wow.'

Still, his bafflement only lasted a second.

A heartbeat later, he regained his composed expression. That composure was only outward, though — inwardly, his emotions were still in turmoil.

'Who… can she be?'

The director bowed slightly, looking at him with a familiar sycophantic smile.

"Mr. Mordret, welcome. I wish that there was a more auspicious reason for your visit, but sadly… well, it is what it is. Oh, and this is Dr. Saint — she was in charge of Miss Morgan's treatment, so she would know best about your sister's mental state."

Mordret blinked a few times.

"Your name is Saint? How fitting."

He smiled.

The beautiful psychiatrist simply looked at him without saying anything. The absolute indifference of her gaze made him feel a little… a little…

Actually, Mordret did not even know how to describe how it made him feel.

All he knew was that he vastly preferred her aloof disregard to the director's obvious desire to please.

'No one has ever treated me that way before...'

Chapter-2508: Stone Cold

After studying the beautiful psychiatrist closer, Mordret noticed how tired and worse for wear Dr. Saint looked. There were bruises on her eerily beautiful face, her clothes were wrinkled under the white lab coat, and one of her hands was bandaged tightly.

A concerned frown found its way onto his face against his will.

"I am sorry. Morgan, did she… were you hurt?"

Dr. Saint remained silent for a few moments, then cast a cold glance at the members of his retinue.

After hesitating a little, she frowned and said in a sonorous, enthralling voice:

"Can we speak in private, Mr. Mordret?"

It took him a few seconds to come to his senses after hearing her voice and realize that she had asked him a question. Mordret stared at the beautiful psychiatrist for a bit, then looked at his bodyguards.

"Wait here."

He gave the director a signal to remain in the lobby, as well.

Dr. Saint nodded.

"Then, follow me."

Turning around, she headed into the depths of the hospital, unlocking several doors with her keycard as they went.

"Is something the matter, Dr. Saint? I am... quite concerned about my sister. I was under the impression that she had been receiving the best treatment here, but the next thing I knew, she vanished. What

exactly happened?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder.

"Last night, Miss Morgan escaped after killing a nurse and three orderlies."

Mordret flinched.

"What? That… why wasn't I informed?"

Uncle Madoc had not mentioned anything about someone having been killed!

Dr. Saint sighed.

"She claims that they were assassins who infiltrated the hospital by posing as staff in order to kill her. Usually, I would have said that Miss Morgan is suffering from paranoid personality disorder… and she might be... but in this case, I am really not sure."

Still shocked, Mordret nodded.

"Yes. Morgan… Morgan is not someone who would hurt people. I mean, she has never hurt anyone. Are you sure that she… she killed someone?"

Then, his eyes widened a little.

"Wait, you said that she claims to have killed them? Meaning that you are in contact with her?"

Dr. Saint nodded again.

"Yes. In fact, I…"

She seemed to hesitate for a while, then added with a hint of reluctance:

"I can take you to her."

Just then, Mordret realized that he had no idea where they were. He had been too distracted by Dr. Saint's stunning beauty at first and the

shocking news about Morgan later.

The two of them had left the more crowded parts of the hospital and were now in some kind of service area. The air was cold and humid, and there was a thin layer of water on the floor.

Mordret looked around in confusion.

"I am sorry, but where are we going?"

Instead of answering, Dr. Saint simply beckoned for him to follow.

They took a few turns, ascended a set of stairs, and ended up in front of a chained door. There, Dr. Saint stopped and gave him a complicated look.

Suddenly finding himself face-to-face with her, gazing into her eyes, Mordret coughed and took a step back in embarrassment.

"Uh… I am sorry, but is there something on my face?"

She remained silent for a while longer, then said evenly:

"Mr. Mordret, I am a person who values orderly and reasonable things. However, the situation we find ourselves in is disorderly and irrational… distasteful, really. So, we can only follow our instincts and do what we think is best."

Mordret blinked a few times.

'What is she…'

Dr. Saint sighed again.

"What I mean to say is that I will not let things get out of hand. If you feel too uncomfortable, give me a signal, and I'll find a way to stop all of this."

Mordret stared at her silently for a few moments with no expression on his face.

Behind the composed facade, however, he was anything but calm.

Eventually, he asked:

"Do you mean… like… a safe word?"

The beautiful psychiatrist frowned, looked at him for a moment, then turned away to unlock the door while ignoring his question completely.

Beyond it was the street running along the utility annex of the hospital. The rain was pouring from the grey sky, and streams of water were flowing through the small gaps in the hastily assembled sandbag barricade. The workers were hastily trying to plug the holes, and a lone security guard was hiding from the rain under the canopy.

Mordret looked past the barricade, though.

There, a ramshackle black car with a cracked windshield was parked in the middle of the street, with two people leaning against it leisurely.

The detectives.

Mordret raised his eyebrows.

"Detective Sunless? Detective Athena? What are you doing here?"

Detective Athena smiled.

"Oh, we just happened to be in the neighborhood.

Detective Sunless smiled, as well.

"We're kidnapping you."

His partner gave him a startled look.

"What? Hey, what happened to the plan? Weren't we going to lure him into the car peacefully?"

He cleared his throat, then offered her a shrug.

"Well... he asked."

Mordret stared at them with a strange expression.

'Huh? Wait, so Dr. Saint...'

Suddenly, he wanted to fall through the ground.

Mordret lingered for a few moments, then shook his head slightly.

"Oh… I am terribly sorry, detectives, but it would be very inconvenient for me to get kidnapped at the moment. I have to find my sister, you see. My parents are also visiting… there are floods in the city, and I need to plan a museum opening as well. So, with all due respect — once again, I am truly sorry — I will have to refuse."

Mordret would have obliged the detectives some other time, but he was otherwise engaged today. So, he was not going to humor them.

'They could have just scheduled an appointment.'

Mordret offered them a polite smile.

…It was then that he felt something cold press against his back, and heard the sound of a pistol hammer being cocked.

Looking over his shoulder, Mordret saw Dr. Saint looking at him with her beautiful, glistening eyes.

One could drown in those eyes, but...

It seemed that she was holding a revolver against his back.

The beautiful psychiatrist sighed, then winced in displeasure.

"Really, now… I must have lost my mind, too."

She took a deep breath.

"Anyway, please get into the car, Mr. Mordret. You are being kidnapped… we are kidnapping you."

Mordret tilted his head a little.

'On second thought, I can go for a ride...'

Chapter-2509: Humble CEO

'...Huh.'

Sunny knew that Saint had agreed to cooperate with them — someone was trying to kill her, after all, and the two deranged detectives seemed to be the only thing standing between her and an early demise. He had also harbored no doubt that she would be able to separate the Other Mordret from his security and lure the poor fool to this secluded service entrance.

What Sunny had not expected, however, was that she would nonchalantly point a gun at the CEO of the Valor Group and tell him to get into the car in an even tone.

Not that he was going to complain.

'Go Saint?'

The workers and the lone security guard did not seem to have noticed the gun yet. Interestingly enough, they weren't turning into glassy-eyed zombies yet, either… which was not that hard to explain.

It was perfectly in character for a hot-headed detective with a grudge to forcefully take away a suspected murderer for interrogation. It was also in character for his inexperienced partner to go along with the plan…

Usually, one of them would have been a maverick, while the other would have loved to do everything by the book. But the Other Mordret was out of luck — the detective duo he had invited into his life were both slightly unhinged.

…Apparently, it was also perfectly in character for Dr. Saint to point guns at people, as long as she considered it a reasonable development.

"With haste, Mr. Mordret. If you will."

Sunny opened the passenger door and invited Mordret into the PTV. The luxuriously dressed CEO gave the old vehicle a dubious glance, then obediently climbed inside. Effie and Saint took the backseat while he looked around the ragged interior with a curious smile.

"How quaint. Detective Sunless, are you perchance an antique collector?"

Sunny, who had just put his hands onto the wheel, gave him a scathing glare.

'This guy…'

"No. I'm just poor. Buckle up!"

Starting the PTV, he drove off at high speed.

As the tires clung desperately to the wet asphalt, Sunny glanced at his passenger, remained silent for a moment, and said:

"Please make no mistake. Technically, we might be kidnapping you… but it is for your own safety. We have reasons to believe that there will be another attempt on your life, and we can't trust your subordinates. So, you might as well think about it as being taken into protective custody. No hard feelings, yes?"

The Other Mordret smiled and assented too easily:

"Yes."

Sunny frowned.

Why was he being so accommodating? A powerful CEO was supposed to be arrogant and domineering — sort of like Morgan had been before the fall of Valor. Imagining trying to force her into a PTV made Sunny shiver.

But since Mordret was being so amicable…

Sunny glanced at him, and then asked in a neutral tone:

"How's that seat belt treating you? Comfortable? That's good… I'm not that comfortable, sadly, because my seat belt is pressing against a stab wound on my side. I've been stabbed, you see. Oh, do you want to know who stabbed me?"

He turned his head a little and smiled darkly.

"I bet it was the same man who stabbed your driver to death. My, oh my… does he not like the idea of anyone driving you around?

The Other Mordret met his gaze with a pleasant expression.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you are talking about, Detective."

Sunny scoffed.

"Sure you don't. You did not probe to see whether my partner is really who she seems to be, either. Right?"

Mordret blinked a few times.

"I'm afraid I do not follow. Whatever do you mean?"

Sunny grinned.

"Cut the crap, would you? We know. We also know that you know. So, how about we have an honest conversation? About your other self, and where both of you come from — the real world."

Mordret looked at him in utter confusion.

"I am… truly sorry, Detective. I'm afraid I still can't grasp your meaning."

Saint did not say anything, but Sunny could read what she wanted to blurt out from her expression, captured in the rearview mirror…

"Finally! A sane person!"

He pursed his lips.

"What is the point of playing games if everything is already in the open? If you are afraid to break character, don't be. Everyone in this

car is real. You are the axis of Mirage City, anyway… the Castellan will probably change the Palace of Imagination to fit whatever you deem to acknowledge instead of punishing you for it."

Mordret's pleasant smile grew a little forced.

"I am not playing games, Detective. I am simply at a loss… you seem to be confused about something."

Sunny threw a dark look at Effie, who just shrugged.

"I don't get why he's being that way, either. There's no reason to, unless there is something we are missing."

Both of them looked at Saint.

She shifted uncomfortably under their gazes.

"Have you considered that it is your actions that are abnormal, as opposed to Mr. Mordret's reaction?"

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other.

"Nope."

"Never crossed my mind."

Saint sighed.

By then, the PTV had left the quiet neighborhood where the hospital was located and driven onto a freeway. Sunny pressed the pedal down, accelerating as he weaved between other vehicles. Mordret's security had to have discovered his disappearance by now — if all had gone as planned, they would have no chance to pursue, but it was still a good idea to hurry away.

At that moment, Effie's communicator rang. She answered the call and listened to it for a few moments, then grimaced.

"Hey, Sunny. I have good news and bad news."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Was that Morgan?"

She nodded.

"Yes. The good news is that we gave Mordret's bodyguards a slip."

Sunny frowned.

"What is the bad news, then?"

Turning around, Effie looked back, at the swiftly moving expanse of the freeway.

"It seems like he had been followed from a distance by several unmarked cars. And unlike his security detail, these cars are already on our tail."

Looking into the rearview mirror, Sunny sighed.

"Yeah… I know. I've been keeping an eye on them since we reached the freeway."

Mordret raised an eyebrow.

"We are being followed? By whom?"

Sunny studied him for a moment, then shook his head.

"Who else? People who want to kill you, of course."

Chapter-2510: High Octane

Sunny could see three cars rushing through traffic to catch up to them — which did not mean that there weren't more. All three were nondescript and unassuming, but at the moment, they looked quite menacing.

He sighed.

"Doesn't make much sense, does it?"

The Other Mordret, who seemed strangely relaxed despite the threat to his life, lingered for a few moments and asked in a curious tone:

"What doesn't make sense, exactly?"

Sunny frowned.

"None of it makes any damn sense…"

By now, they knew that there was a larger conspiracy hiding behind the seemingly random Nihilist killings. Still, the first seven victims had been killed by the same lunatic — their missing eyes hinted at that, at least. However, there was also the driver of the truck who had pushed Mordret's car into the river, as well as all the assailants from last night.

And now, there seemed to be a large coordinated force trying to finish the job.

Sunny grimaced.

"Hold on tight. This… might be a bumpy ride."

Pressing the pedal to the floor, he threw the PTV forward.

"Ack!"

Saint grabbed the assist grip and looked at him darkly.

"Detective Sunless, where did you learn to drive?"

Sunny grinned.

"The wartorn reaches of Antarctica!"

Spinning the wheel, he managed to just barely squeeze the PTV between two speeding vehicles and change lanes. With a bit of free road in front of him, he accelerated even more.

The rain was pelting the cracked windshield, and the wipers were drowning as they fruitlessly tried to clear it. It was practically impossible to see what was ahead, and the headlights of the vehicles around them fused into red and white blurs. His black PTV raced across the freeway at a speed that would have usually been negligible to Sunny, but was now terrifying.

The black vehicles roared, as if welcoming the mad race. It was met with outraged horns of surrounding PTVs, which fell behind in a matter of moments.

Sunny weaved between lanes, overtaking one vehicle after another with risky maneuvers. Their pursuers, sadly, were doing the same.

He glanced into the rearview mirror briefly.

"Do you know, guys…"

He threw the PTV in front of a heavy truck, managing to swerve onto an exit ramp at the last moment. The curve of the ramp was too steep, however, and the left side of the black vehicle was stripped bare of a layer of paint as it slid along the concrete barrier with an ear-piercing screech.

Recovering from being jostled, Sunny sent the PTV onto the streets of Mirage City and smiled.

"This one time, my APC drove through a horde of Nightmare Creatures on a coastal highway, maneuvering between carriages of a derailed train… while a sinking battleship bombarded the mountains

above us with artillery fire…"

There was the sound of something crashing behind them, and a car shattered the concrete barrier, falling from a height in a rain of debris. A moment later, it hit the asphalt and rolled, crashing into the wall of a nearby building as a pile of bent metal.

But another car was already rushing down the ramp, eager to catch up with them.

The Other Mordret forced out a pale smile.

"I… don't really understand half of what you said, Detective. But you must be an incredible driver!"

Sunny glanced at him in confusion.

"What? Oh, I wasn't the one driving… to be honest, I am not even certified as a vehicle operator…"

With that, he spun the wheel, sent the car drifting around a narrow corner, and accelerated again to climb a steep hill.

The pedestrians crossing the road rushed away in a panic at the sight of the speeding car. Sunny's PTV crested the top of the hill at high speed and was airborne for a few moments, then crashed heavily into the asphalt and continued forward, cutting through the layer of water flowing down the sloping road.

"In any case…"

Behind them, two pursuing cars soared from behind the hill. Landing with a bit more grace than the black vehicle, they accelerated, almost catching up to him. Sunny swerved his PTV left and right, trying to prevent them from overtaking.

"I guess we are lucky that the Devil Detective drove automatic. Sort of out of character for him, don't you think? Not that I really know what a stick shift is. Or what a shift is. It's just that there's a lot of nonsense about that in his memories…"

One of the cars managed to get past him, after all. It sped up and

came to ride side by side with the black PTV. Behind its windows, dark shapes were moving…

Not giving the pursuers a chance to do anything, Sunny spun the wheel and crashed the side of his vehicle into the enemy. He groaned slightly, being rattled by the impact, and struggled to maintain control. The other vehicle was only pushed aside a little…

But that little was enough to throw it into the concrete divider. The damage was catastrophic, and the vehicle was almost cut in half.

A split second later, it was far behind, out of sight.

'One left…'

Sadly, the last pursuer was moments away from running Sunny's PTV off the road.

Looking at the side mirror, he briefly noticed the Other Mordret.

That guy… was smiling brightly while holding for dear life.

Sunny suppressed the desire to curse.

"You… what the hell are you so happy about?"

The Other Mordret looked at him with an excited glint in his strange mirror-like eyes.

"Sorry. It's just… exactly like in the books I used to read! A high-speed chase with our lives on the line. So exciting!"

Sunny stared at him silently for a moment, then hurriedly turned back to the road.

'...And he had the nerve to put Morgan into an asylum. That lunatic!'

He flew across an intersection on a red light, barely avoiding being hit by the rushing traffic. Sunny had hoped that the last pursuer would be less fortunate, but the enemy car passed the intersection with no trouble, with only bystander vehicles ending up losing control and smashing into each other. They were not going too fast,

at least, so the passengers would only receive minor injuries…

By then, Sunny had reached the bottom of the hill.

He turned at the last second, sending the car onto the raised pavement. The pursuer, however, reacted a little too slowly — as a result, the PTV drove straight into the deep puddle at the bottom of the hill, burrowing into the water deep enough for its engine to be flooded.

Sunny's PTV had to struggle against the flooded area, as well, but the water was far shallower on the edges of the street.

Barreling through the rows of crates and a few trash bins, Sunny swerved back onto the road and looked at Mordret with a dark smile.

"How's that? Exciting enough for you?"

Just then, they reached the next intersection.

And a moment later, a fourth vehicle appeared out of the rain, crashing into the side of the black PTV at full speed.

Chapter-2511: Bang Bang

'Aaahh…'

The world was full of pain. The world was also upside down, and something was streaming down Sunny's face. He could feel the familiar taste of blood on his tongue… but also of something else, unbearably bitter and oily, which made him want to wretch. A sharp scent was assaulting his nostrils, seemingly seeping into his very brain.

Opening his eyes, he beheld the world in utter confusion. The crack on the windshield of his PTV seemed to have disappeared… no, the windshield itself was gone, turned into a scattering of glass shards. The PTV was laying on its roof, with water flowing inside through the shattered windows.

The interior of the mangled vehicle was bent and misshapen. The wheel was broken, the dashboard was gone, and he could see a mess of sparking wires behind the displaced plastic panels.

The liquid flowing down his face was blood mixed with gasoline.

Hanging upside down, held in place by his seat belt, Sunny groaned.

'The fuel… that damn fuel…'

Who in their right mind fueled their PTVs with flammable fuel?!

Now, he was one spark away from turning into a blackened, crispy corpse.

Turning his head a little, Sunny saw the Other Mordret hanging from his seat, unconscious. The rearview mirror was gone, though, so he could not tell what happened to Effie and Saint.

'I am so… fed up with this crap.'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tried to disengage his seatbelt. When that did not work, he growled in frustration and pulled a tactical knife from a hidden sheath on his belt — the very same knife he had almost been killed with last night.

A few moments later, Sunny fell down onto the roof of the overturned PTV and let out a stifled scream.

"Sick of it… I'm sick of it…"

Crawling through empty space where the windshield had been, Sunny felt the cold rain washing the blood off his face.

He was a damn Sovereign. He was a Supreme Titan — a being much closer to being divine than to being human. He was not supposed to bleed, his hands were not supposed to be cut by the shards of glass, and his ribs were not supposed to crack from something as pedestrian as being hit by a speeding vehicle.

Sunny was indignant.

Sunny was angry.

He was completely over this nonsense.

The amount and the intensity of pain he felt would have sent an ordinary person into shock and paralyzed them, but Sunny simply ignored it — after all, this mundane suffering could not compare to the harrowing agony he had endured countless times before. Letting out an infuriating hiss, he pushed himself off the wet asphalt and slowly stood up.

Sunny swayed, staggered, but remained upright, looking around with a murderous glint in his bloodshot eyes.

The vehicle that had crashed into his PTV was a dozen or so meters away, deformed and leaking some sort of fluid. Its doors were open, and men in black clothes and masks were already getting out. Another vehicle had just skidded to a halt to his right, and even more masked men were pouring outside, into the rain.

'One, two…'

Sunny's vision was blurry, so he couldn't even count them.

'Enough to vent my anger, anyway.'

Behind him, the bent door of the overturned PTV suddenly flew off from a powerful kick, ricocheting off the asphalt a few times before coming to a stop. Effie climbed out awkwardly, then rose to her feet by using the mangled frame of the vehicle as support.

She was bruised and battered, too, but seemingly in a better shape than Sunny — he was hit the hardest because the enemy PTV had crashed into the driver's door.

Giving Sunny a dazed look, Effie smiled crookedly.

Her lips and teeth were painted red by blood, so that smile looked a bit frightening.

"You alive?"

Sunny let go of the car and spent a few seconds remembering how to maintain balance.

"Technically, I'm dead… but yeah."

Effie stared at him for a moment, then looked away and rolled her eyes.

"Another one. Gods, why am I always surrounded by zombies?"

She straightened and faced the approaching enemies with a sober expression.

"Morgan should be here in a few minutes, I think."

Sunny raised a hand to wipe the blood from his eyes. He did not feel too well, at the moment.

"Do you think we can survive a few minutes?"

Effie smiled wryly.

"Of course. I don't know about you… but I'm not dying on an empty stomach. I refuse to."

Her bloody smile widened a little.

The masked men were about to reach them.

There were seven of them, each armed with knives or batons. Sunny and Effie, meanwhile, were both in sorry states, bleeding and barely standing upright.

It hardly mattered, though.

'Hey, Castellan. If you're watching…'

Sunny took a shaky step forward, then pretended to stumble. The nearest of the assailants used the opportunity to strike while the enemy was off balance — lunging forward, the man raised his baton and struck down, aiming to crack Sunny's skull.

Instead of swaying and desperately trying to regain his balance, though, Sunny suddenly pivoted on one leg, dodged the baton, then grabbed the assailant's wrist and plunged his knife into his arm. He pushed the blade upward, slicing it open from wrist to elbow, then pushed the man away and kicked him in the abdomen.

The masked man flew back, colliding against his companions and momentarily blocking their approach.

'Let me show you what the people from the real world are like. You poor fool.'

To his left, Effie used the enviable length of her shapely, runway-worthy legs to push-kick one of the assailants in the chest before his knife could get anywhere near her. Things like weight and reach were much more important in fights between mundane people, where soul essence did not serve as the great equalizer — so, her height gave her an advantage.

Even without essence, Effie's strength seemed almost monstrous. Her blow was powerful enough to send the man flying back and crashing heavily into the asphalt, as if he had been kicked by a horse. He

rolled over his shoulder, folded awkwardly, and remained laying there in a groaning heap.

Sunny smiled wickedly.

'You should have never messed with us, bastard.'

But then, his expression fell.

'Wait…'

Seven… why were there seven assailants?

Each of the two enemy vehicles had all its doors open, four per PTV. Which meant that… which meant that…

There were supposed to be eight of them!

Cursing, he spun around and saw a dark shape leaning to thrust a blade through the window on the passenger side of the overturned PTV. Where Mordret was entangled in a seat belt, still unconscious.

'Crap!'

Sunny threw his battered body forward, knowing full well that he would never be able to circle the car in time.

But then…

There was a loud crack, and the falling torrents of rain were illuminated for a split second by a bright flash.

The back of the eighth assailant's head evaporated into a bloody mist.

Time seemed to slow down.

Saint's disheveled form revealed itself from behind the mangled PTV. Her hair was a wet mess, and there were oily stains on her coat, but other than that, she seemed mostly fine.

As the assailant's body fell to the ground, Saint looked down, at the smoking revolver in her hand. There was a distant expression on her beautiful face…

But only for a moment.

'Wha…'

Then, Saint's expression settled into a mask of aloof indifference, and she moved her hand in Sunny's direction.

Bang! Bang!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

It only took her a couple of seconds to discharge the five remaining bullets, hitting the five remaining assailants with eerie precision.

Each hit was a flawless headshot.

...Sunny flinched belatedly.

Chapter-2512: Dr. Saint

The bodies fell onto the wet asphalt.

In the wake of the deafening gunshots, the world was filled with a ringing silence. The rustling of rain drowned out all other sounds and obscured the surrounding buildings, making the whole scene seem a little surreal.

Six of the eight assailants were dead. One was trying to crawl away weakly, bleeding heavily and not long for this world. The eighth seemed to have lost consciousness.

Sunny blinked a few times, then exhaled slowly.

He was startled, relieved… and a little disappointed.

The battle had only just started, and now, it was suddenly over. As a result, his boiling emotions had nowhere to escape, churning and simmering inside his soul — he took a deep breath, swallowed them, and then exhaled again, trying to purge them.

In life, there were worse things to feel disappointed about.

'Well, that…'

Has been quite unexpected.

Now that the danger seemed to have passed, he allowed the pain to wash over him, swayed, and let out a quiet groan.

"I'll be damned."

Effie's voice was full of stunned disbelief. She looked at Sunny and raised her eyebrows, at a loss for words.

He stared back at her for a while, then shrugged while raising both

hands.

Yes, that had happened.

Turning away from Effie, Sunny circled the car and approached Saint, who was still standing there with a revolver in her hand, no expression written on her face. Sunny studied her for a few moments, then raised a hand and gently pushed the revolver down.

It was only then that she stirred and looked at him, her face still frozen.

"Detective Sunless…"

Saint's voice sounded a bit hollow.

"I am out of bullets."

He offered her a reassuring smile.

"That's alright. You don't need more bullets."

She looked around, studying the scene of carnage she had perpetrated, and then nodded thoughtfully.

After a few moments of silence, Saint spoke again, sounding uncharacteristically unsure of herself:

"Detective, I… I feel strange."

Sunny sighed.

'What a mess.'

Saint had yet to remember herself, so she still considered herself to be a law-abiding citizen who was far removed from strife and violence of any kind, let alone cold-blooded killing — like any normal person was. More than that, she was a doctor, someone whose life's work it was to help people, not kill them.

But at a decisive moment, her true instincts — the instincts of Onyx Saint, the taciturn Shadow born on the streets of the Dark City —

must have taken over.

Naturally, she was in shock.

She was probably horrified, failing to process her thoughts and emotions.

Or… maybe not.

Maybe there was a different reason why Saint was feeling strange.

"Sunny!"

Hearing Effie's yell, Sunny turned around and frowned. It took him a few seconds to realize that there was something deeply wrong with what he was seeing.

"What the…"

The six corpses seemed to be melting.

They were turning into wisps of ghostly white mist, and that mist was stretching its tendrils toward Saint.

She looked at the mist with a dazed expression.

Suddenly panicked, Sunny moved to shield her with his body, but the ghostly mist simply passed through him, as if meeting no resistance at all. All that was left behind was the sense of an eerie, otherworldly chill.

"Damn it!"

Spinning around, Sunny frenetically tried to come up with a countermeasure…

But there was no need.

The mist did not harm Saint. Instead, it was being absorbed into her body, disappearing without a trace.

It would have looked concerning if it did not look so… familiar.

'Huh?'

Sunny had seen something similar once before.

Rather, he had not seen it, blinded by true darkness — but he had sensed it.

It had happened in the great Hollows of Godgrave, during the battle of Vanishing Lake. Back then, Saint shattered one of Mordret's Reflections, which had been mirroring Revel.

Saint had absorbed the mirrored darkness then. But she also absorbed the wisps of eerie, chilling mist that had appeared after the Reflection was destroyed.

Now that Sunny knew how Others had been created, he could confirm his suspicions that they contained nothingness within them. When the Reflection was destroyed, that nothingness was released — and Saint took it for herself, which granted her an ability to manipulate her weight, reducing it at will.

And now, she was absorbing more nothingness.

'How does it even work?'

Nothing of the sort had happened when Sunny killed the three thugs near the hospital last night. So, this process had to be unique to Saint, because she already had a minor affinity to Nothing, and wanted more.

The long tendrils of white mist flowed faster and faster, being absorbed into Saint's body. The mist was ethereal and ghostly, but nevertheless, a powerful wind rose as a white vortex surrounded Saint. Her raven-black hair fluttered like a stream of pure darkness, and her eyes seemed to blaze with a cold crimson light for a moment.

The torrent of rain seemed to freeze, countless droplets of water suspended in the air.

Then, it all ended abruptly.

The wind died down, and the rain resumed, splashing heavily against

the asphalt.

The six corpses were nowhere to be seen.

Saint flinched, then rubbed her eyes in confusion.

"Oh…"

She blinked a few times.

"Sorry. I seem to have gotten dazed for a few moments."

She smiled tentatively, then offered the revolver to Sunny.

"I think it will be… it will be better if you take this, Detective."

Sunny looked at the archaic gun, which Saint was gripping a little bit too tightly.

The solid metal was bending like wax in her grip, and by now, the entire thing looked like a shapeless lump of metal.

Naturally, that was not a strength that a mundane person could possess.

To bend metal like clay, one had to possess the power of at least an Awakened.

Sunny looked at Saint with a stunned expression.

'I'll be damned, indeed.'

It seemed that she had somehow regained at least a part of her power.

Chapter-2513: Acrid Scent

Sunny stared at the lump of metal in Saint's hand.

Saint stared at it, too.

Effie stared at Sunny and Saint with a funny expression.

"Wow."

She came closer and inspected the former revolver, then said thoughtfully:

"Is this the power of therapy?"

'What in the world is she saying?'

Sunny finally managed to regain his composure.

At that moment, he smelled something in the air. An acrid stench that assailed his nostrils despite the rain.

Smoke.

His eyes widened a little.

'Oh, no.'

"Help me get him out!"

Behind them, the leaking fuel had finally ignited, and fire was swiftly spreading across the overturned PTV.

"Crap."

Forgetting her jokes, Effie grabbed the deformed passenger door and tried to pry it open. Sadly, even her incredible strength was not

enough to dislodge it — the door was bent completely out of shape and stuck, jammed by something from inside.

It only took Sunny a split second to evaluate the situation.

Finally taking what remained of the revolver from Saint's hand, he gestured to the PTV.

"Dr. Saint… can you give it a try?"

Still showing symptoms of being in shock, she nodded slowly, and then reached forward to grab the edges of the deformed door.

The bent metal simply tore like paper under her fingers, and a moment later, she easily ripped the door off its hinges.

Dropping it to the ground, Saint stared at her hands in dazed silence.

"Great job!"

Sadly, Sunny did not have time to comfort her at the moment. Diving into the interior of the battered PTV, which was slowly filling with fire and smoke, he swiftly cut the seat belt and grabbed the unconscious form of the Other Mordret.

A second later, Sunny had already dragged the CEO of the Valor Group out of the PTV. The fire just barely managed to lick his designer leather shoes.

Falling into a puddle, Sunny let out a stifled groan and allowed the rain to cool down his face.

'Ah… damnation.'

He had been stabbed yesterday. Today, he was hit by a PTV.

What the hell was going to happen tomorrow?

Before Sunny could relax, Effie grabbed him and hoisted him to his feet.

"What are you doing?!"

Sunny stared at her in confusion.

Exasperated, Effie pointed at the burning PTV, which was already spouting billowing pillars of black smoke.

"Flammable fuel, remember?! It's going to explode!"

Sunny stared at her with confusion for a moment, then shuddered and jumped to his feet.

He grabbed Saint and dragged her away, while Effie hoisted the Other Mordret on her shoulder like a sack of synthpaste and followed.

They dashed forward, suffering from the pain in their bruised and injured bodies, only stopping when they were a safe distance away.

Sunny fell to the ground again, and this time, Effie followed, panting heavily after she placed Mordret down.

They looked back at the burning car, preparing to duck down when it blew up.

However…

A few seconds passed, and then a few more.

And then, even more still.

Effie scrunched her face.

"Huh… why isn't it exploding?"

Sunny gave her a long look, then palmed his face and let out a long sigh.

"Why would it explode? Flammable and explosive are two entirely different things! There's not even much pressure in the fuel tank!"

Effie blinked a few times.

"But they always explode in the movies!"

Sunny groaned.

"Do you believe everything you see in the movies? There are movies about you, damn it! And those are completely fabricated!"

Effie remained silent for a while, then coughed sheepishly.

"Oh. Right. Makes sense."

Sunny wanted to say more, but at that moment, a new PTV appeared out of the rain, sliding on the wet asphalt and stopping just in front of them.

He would have prepared for another fight if not for the fact that this PTV was quite familiar — it was Effie's family car, which they had entrusted to Morgan.

Sunny had suspected that getting the Other Mordret out would not be easy. So, Morgan had been left behind to make sure that his security detail did not catch up to them, then follow them from a distance.

Her secondary goal had been to check if anyone else was following the CEO of the Valor Group — as a result, she called Effie and informed her about the pursuing vehicles.

Granted, the plan did not go as intended, in the end. Sunny had hoped to meet up with Morgan further down the road and change vehicles before retreating back to the abandoned church, so that nobody could track them. Sadly, the pursuers ended up acting far more aggressively than he had anticipated, resulting in a car crash and a bloody fight.

…In hindsight, it was for the best.

If everything had gone without a hitch, Saint would not have absorbed the white mist and regained some of her power.

The door of Effie's PTV opened, and Morgan walked out into the rain, still wearing oversized clothes.

It was a bit funny, to see the elegant Princess of Valor in such a peculiar outfit… but Sunny wisely held his comments back, knowing

that he could very well lose at least a finger or two if he said anything.

Morgan stopped for a moment to take in the sight of the carnage.

An overturned PTV was enveloped in flames, with a pillar of black smoke rising into the sky. Another vehicle was standing tilted to one side, its entire forward portion crushed. The road was covered in blood, with two motionless bodies soaking in the rain.

Sunny and Effie were both battered and sitting on the ground, Saint was standing above them with a lost expression, while the Other Mordret was unconscious, his stylish suit charred and dirty.

Morgan stared at him for a long while, then sneered and looked away.

"Having fun without me? What, were these two highly skilled, elite assassins too?"

Sunny shook his head.

"They were trained, for sure… but actually, there had been eight of them."

Effie nodded somberly.

"Until Miss Saint shot six of them dead, and then... ate them."

Saint flinched and looked at her with wide eyes.

Morgan frowned.

"Let's leave the explanations for later. For now, get in the car."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then shook his head again.

"This altercation was far too public. We'll need to give some sort of explanation, unless we want to become official fugitives."

He sighed.

"And we can't become fugitives, because that would give the entire

city a legitimate reason to hunt us down — an opportunity that the Castellan won't ever miss. So, take Saint and the Other Mordret and go. Effie and I will stay and deal with the repercussions."

Morgan gave him a cold glance, lingered for a while, and then nodded.

"Alright. You two look like you need to visit a hospital, anyway. I promise I won't kill this… person… before we meet again."

With that, she pulled her leather gloves up, bent down, and grabbed the Other Mordret.

"Dr. Saint, please get into the car."

Saint looked at her for a few moments, then quietly climbed into Effie's PTV.

Soon enough, the PTV drove off, leaving Sunny and Effie alone at the scene of the crime.

She sighed.

"You know what? I never thought I'd be a cop one day. What about you?"

Sunny considered her question for a bit.

"Actually, I had been a cop for a day, once."

She looked at him with a stunned expression.

"Really? What did you do?"

Sunny shrugged tiredly.

"Tracked an unhinged Awakened and helped the government put him down. You know how it is."

Effie stared at him for a while, then threw her head back and laughed.

"Oh? And when you did… did you think that you'll be the unhinged

Awakened, one day?"

Sunny smiled tiredly.

To be honest, he had been a little bit unhinged back then, already...

Chapter-2514: Too Old

"You absolute cretins! Goddamn ingrates! Complete and utter morons! Atrocious, abominable addlepates!"

The Homicide Division Captain's face was so red that Sunny was starting to get seriously concerned about the old man's health. He was positively apoplectic, shouting at the top of his lungs… howling, almost. Spit was flying every which way, and his entire desk was shaking, as if scared of the old man's rage.

Sunny and Effie were standing on the carpet in front of the desk, looking down like naughty children.

"But, Captain…"

"Shut the hell up! Shut your damn mouth, you damn miscreant!

The Captain slammed his fist into the table with so much force that the screen of his primitive computer jumped, and his coffee mug flew off the wooden surface.

Unsatisfied, he hit the desk a few more times, making it seem like the desktop would crack.

Sunny looked at the Captain with concern, making the man go pale with fury.

"You reprobate dimwits! Foul degenerates! Horrid, heinous, obscene lowlifes! You absolute buffoons! Do you have no brains whatsoever between the two of you, huh?! Answer me, you fetid scumbags!"

Sunny glanced at Effie, hesitated for a moment, and then said carefully:

"Well…"

The captain growled, looking ready to flip his desk over.

"I said shut the hell up!"

He huffed and puffed, glaring at them with pure, unadulterated loathing.

Sunny sighed.

"You see, we thought…"

The Captain threw a paperweight at him.

The paperweight missed Sunny by about a meter and shattered the frame of a fancy certificate of recognition behind him.

"Oh, you can think now?! There are thoughts in your dull, defective heads now?! You lousy, pestilent dumbasses! Depraved, deplorable, detestable simpletons! You sordid varlets! Go die in a ditch, bastards!"

Sunny winced.

'That's taking it too far…'

After all, they looked half-dead, already.

Both Sunny and Effie were covered in bandages, with bruises and plaster everywhere. He even had one of his arms resting in a sling.

Effie decided to make her presence known at that moment.

"Captain, please calm down…'

Sadly, her words had the opposite effect.

Instead of calming down, the Captain drew a hoarse breath and shook, resembling a boiling kettle. Sunny almost expected to see steam coming out of his ears.

"Calm down?! CALM DOWN?! You calm down! Calm the hell down, you filthy, abhorrent, ghastly malcontents! Lamebrain halfwits! Delinquent hoodlums! Depraved, contemptible assholes! You

repugnant wretches!"

Now he wasn't even making any sense.

Luckily, the Captain seemed to have run out of steam… or out of expletives, perhaps.

He fell heavily back on his chair, eased up his tie, and unbuttoned the top button of his white shirt. After catching his breath, the Captain gritted his teeth and looked at them with scathing malice.

"You… you…"

He raised a shaky hand and picked up a binder from his desk.

"Let me go over your incredible feats, bastards. Where should I start…"

The old man shook the binder in the air.

"Damaged road surface… destroyed barriers of a freeway exit ramp… a lane divider completely obliterated… that's just city property, you ghouls! There's private property, as well! Do you like driving on pavements?!"

The Captain took a ragged breath.

"Do you know how much all of this costs?! You pair of cowboys can work for the rest of your goddamn lives, and your combined paychecks won't be enough to cover the cost! Your damn grandchildren will still be paying for all the mayhem you caused long after you two are buried in cheap, budget caskets!"

He covered his face with a palm.

"Now, where did I stop? Oh, damages… forget about the damages! Damages are the least of your troubles. Multiple injuries among civilian drivers, all lawsuits waiting to happen. One criminal is in a morgue, one is in the ICU with multiple rib fractures and a collapsed lung, still unconscious. Someone will have to pay his hospital bill, as well! By Mirage, couldn't you have killed him too, at least?!"

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other again.

Sunny coughed.

"Well… if you want… that can still be…"

The Captain frenetically searched for his paperweight, then remembered that he had already tossed it at Sunny, and threw a decorative statuette at him instead.

This time, the statuette shattered the frame of a photo portrait.

"Die! Go die, you lunatic!"

The old man shook, then groaned.

"Actually, forget about the damages, the lawsuits, and the hospital bills. Mordret of the Valor Group! Why did you have to grab him — him, of all people! — without a warrant!"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"You see, Captain. We were reasonably sure that his life was in danger. So, we took him into protective custody… sort of… and what would you know? We were right!"

Effie nodded energetically.

"Right! Those guys were trying to kill him, and we saved his life. So, we… are basically heroes. Yeah."

The Captain just stared at her with resignation.

Letting out a groan, he leaned back and whispered in a tired voice:

"I'm too old for this crap. I'm too old…"

He remained silent for a long while, and then barked so loudly that the glass in the windows trembled.

"Then how did he disappear?! How the hell did he vanish from your goddamn protective custody?!"

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Well, sir, you see… his sister appeared and drove off with him. We haven't seen him since."

The Captain banged his head against the desk.

"His sister?! The same sister who escaped from a mental asylum yesterday?!"

Sunny nodded, then offered in a helpful tone:

"Yes, sir. Her name is Morgan."

"I know what her damn name is! I knooooow!"

The Captain straightened slowly and looked at them with a distant expression.

Then, he sighed and shook his head.

"In any case… both of you are suspended effective immediately. Until further notice, or indefinitely."

Sunny and Effie both raised their heads at the sound of that.

"Captain!"

"Sir!"

The Captain barked:

"Don't sir me! You don't even understand how royally you screwed up, do you?! And not just that, you screwed me over in the process!"

He gritted his teeth.

"You are lucky to be suspended, idiots. Be thankful that I'm not putting you behind bars! I would love nothing more! But that will only add to the mountain of crap I need to shovel. So… surrender your badges and get the hell out of my sight. Now!"

Sunny and Effie looked at each other.

Honestly, they did not particularly care about having these… badges. But out of respect for the elderly captain, they both acted appropriately crushed.

Effie hung her shoulders, walked up to the desk, and silently placed her badge on it.

Sunny took out his own and did the same.

After placing the badge on the desk and before letting go of it, though, he looked at the Captain and said:

"You can take our badges, Captain… but you can't take our resolve."

That nonsense sounded like something the Devil Detective would have said.

So, he said it.

The Captain looked at him tiredly.

Then, he sighed.

"I'm going to kill you."

Opening a drawer, he took out a holstered gun and started to pull the clasp open.

"I mean, I'm going to kill you right now…"

Sunny hurriedly let go of his badge and stepped away.

"Goodbye, Captain! Keep up the good work!"

A moment later, both he and Effie were gone, having retreated from the Captain's office with startling haste.

The old man looked down, at the two badges laying on his desk.

He sighed heavily.

"Too old, I'm too old… I'm too old for this crap..."

Chapter-2515: Last Meal

It was a bit funny — the badge was such a small thing, but Sunny felt almost naked without it.

Suspended and tossed out of the police force, he and Effie found themselves standing in front of the Mirage PD headquarters, staring at the falling rain with somber expressions. It had taken a lot of time for them to be treated, interrogated, and then berated by the Captain, so the sun was already setting. Both were in a subdued mood.

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"Feels strange. I've never been fired before, you know?"

Effie scratched the back of her head.

"Me neither."

Sunny contemplated something for a moment.

"Actually, I've never really been employed before either."

Effie tilted her head a little.

"Me neither. Wait, does working for the government count?"

He considered her question seriously, then shook his head.

"No. You joined the government as a Saint — that's like being a boss, not an employee."

Effie nodded with a chuckle.

"I guess so. But, hey! Technically, you were employed by Nephis during the Domain War, as a mercenary. She paid you, so… that was a job."

Sunny frowned.

"No, it wasn't."

Also, technically, Nephis had not paid him yet. He had asked her to owe him a favor as payment in return for his services, and never mentioned it again.

Before he could explain that, however, Effie gave him a mischievous look.

"Just because you slept with the boss doesn't mean that you weren't employed, right?"

Sunny punched her in the shoulder and grimaced when that made his battered body flare with pain.

"Right. But she did not employ me… I tricked her into thinking that she employed me, but really, it has always been my goal to participate in the war on her side. I joined voluntarily."

Effie blinked a few times.

"Huh. Wait, really?"

Sunny looked at her in surprise.

"Yes. Wait, you didn't know? Why did you think I planted the Nameless Temple in the middle of Godgrave? Because living in a Death Zone is fun?"

Effie stared back at him, baffled.

"I mean, I just assumed that you are a reclusive misanthrope. So yeah."

Sunny laughed.

"I'm not. No, I mean… I am, but that was not why I rooted my Citadel in Godgrave. I just predicted where the war would take place, established a presence there, and let the rumors about me spread, knowing that the Great Clans would take the bait and come find me

eventually."

Effie shook her head in bewilderment.

"Wow. How devious. Were you planning to make a move on Nephis from the very start, too?"

Sunny smiled and looked into the distance.

"No. Quite the opposite. My plan was to never take my mask off in front of anyone, let alone her. Needless to say, that plan failed spectacularly. Thank the gods."

Effie chuckled.

"Aww."

She looked at him with earnestness and said in a touched tone:

"Anyway, I am starving to death. Diner?"

Sunny did not answer for a few moments, remembering the delicious food served in the unassuming diner.

"Sure. I'm starving too."

He remained motionless for a while, facing the rain, and then asked:

"Do you know what sucks, though?"

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Sunny closed his eyes and grimaced.

"My PTV is a pile of charred scrap metal now. How are we even supposed to get anywhere?"

She blinked a few times.

"Oh. Oh!"

Effie lingered for a little while, then sighed.

"You're right. That does suck…"

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Sunny and Effie could not rendezvous with the others immediately because they were being watched. Shaking off a tail was not easy without a vehicle, either, which meant that they had to buy some time and keep a low profile for a while.

So, having learned the strange rituals of hailing a taxi in Mirage City, they soon arrived at the familiar diner.

The city outside was drowning.

The rain, which had been oppressively persistent when they first arrived at Mirage City, was simply unnatural now. It poured and poured from the dark heavens, inescapable, never letting up — in fact, it seemed to only grow heavier as time passed. The rivers and canals were on the verge of overflowing, and the lakes were slowly devouring more and more of their shores.

The flooding in the lowlands had already begun. Countless people were being evacuated, and even more were moving to temporary shelters on higher ground themselves. Because of that, the roads were terribly congested, with car horns blaring constantly as numerous vehicles became hopelessly stuck.

A few of these congested roads had been flooded, as well, so people had to abandon their PTVs and escape on foot.

Somewhere far away, behind the dams, great reservoirs of water were swelling, too.

But everything was fine in the vicinity of the decrepit diner. The floods had not reached this part of the city, and the locals were not in a hurry to move anywhere, either — after all, their neighborhood sat atop a tall hill, so short of a catastrophic failure of the northern dam, nothing could really threaten them.

The dining hall was just as empty as always, and the grumpy waitress

disappeared into the staff area after delivering their food. Sunny and Effie dedicated themselves to the sin of gluttony for a while, briefly forgetting all their scrapes and aches.

When they were done, Sunny leaned back in satisfaction and sighed.

"Sort of feels… like our last meal, doesn't it?"

It was in more senses than one.

Their adventure in Mirage City was swiftly moving toward a conclusion — not because they were ready to conquer the Palace of Imagination, but simply because the Castellan was steadily escalating its attacks. Whether Sunny and his companions were ready or not, there was not much time left for them.

In a few days, maybe even as soon as tomorrow, the final confrontation between them and the Castellan was going to take place.

No matter how it ended, Sunny and Effie were unlikely to return to this secluded diner and enjoy the food served here by an unfriendly waitress. They would either win and return to the real world… or die.

Either way, this was indeed their last meal here.

Effie looked at the empty plates with a somber expression, then sighed.

"Well, if that is the case… should we order another one of everything?"

Chapter-2516: Surrender

Some time later, they shared a kettle of fragrant tea while digesting their food in peace. Sunny warmed his hands on the cheap metal cup, letting the hot steam wash over his bruised face and chase some of the soreness away. Effie had stretched her legs under the table and crossed them, staring at her tea with a distant expression.

Somewhere outside the diner, many sets of eyes were secretly observing them. Some of them belonged to the mysterious force that wanted Mordret dead, and was hoping to reach him by following the two detectives who had seen them last.

There was another pair of eyes, as well.

Sunny could not be entirely sure, but he was confident that the real Mordret was spying on them, as well. He had been protecting his nicer twin from the shadows, so not knowing where the CEO of Valor had been taken to was not something the Prince of Nothing could or would tolerate.

But there was nothing Sunny could do about any of that just yet.

Glancing at Effie, he took a sip of tea and asked:

"What are you thinking about?"

Effie was distracted from her thoughts and looked at him without her usual carefree smile.

She remained silent for a while, then said:

"The future."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"The future?"

Effie nodded.

"Yes. Not tomorrow, or the day after that. Not even the Fourth Nightmare and Supremacy, but… about what happens next."

He considered her words for a few moments.

"So, the end of the world."

He meant it quite literally. The waking world was already being slowly devoured by the Dream Realm, and that process was only going to accelerate exponentially in the coming years.

Before too long, there would be no waking world at all. It could last for another decade, or maybe even a few… but no longer than that.

Effie studied Sunny silently, then asked:

"When we become Supreme, you and Nephis are going to challenge the Fifth Nightmare, aren't you?"

Sunny hesitated for a while.

Actually, he was not sure how to answer that question.

He was still undecided… he still did not know if he was ready to fight for his fate, and the bonds that came with it, or abandon it forever and look for a different path to Apotheosis than the one offered by the Spell.

Eventually, he shrugged.

"If there is no better way, sure."

Now that he was reminded about the complicated choice looming over him, his thoughts turned in that direction.

Effie hesitated for a while.

"The Fifth Nightmare… Apotheosis. It changes you, doesn't it? Makes you more divine. But it also makes you leave some of your humanity behind."

Still consumed by his thoughts, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"In a way. That is what I heard, at least. Why?"

Effie looked down.

"I am just wondering what will become of me after I attain Supremacy. Will I be able to stop there, or will I be forced to continue walking forward? And if I do… what I will have to leave behind."

She smiled wistfully.

"It will be ironic, won't it? If the only way to protect what I cherish most is to abandon it. I am… not sure that I would want to do something like that. That I am capable of it."

Sunny remained silent for a long time.

"That would be quite ironic, yes. Life is full of irony that way, I find."

Gods knew his life was.

Letting out a sigh, Sunny focused on his tea.

After enjoying its warmth for a while, he asked:

"Hey, Effie. Can I ask you a question?"

She smiled faintly.

"Go ahead."

Sunny chewed his lips for a few seconds.

"It is sort of a moral conundrum. Let's say that you love someone, and they love you back… but you can't be with that person unless you surrender to their will completely. Unless you trust them completely. Would you still do it?"

Effie stared at him with a neutral expression for a while.

Then, she frowned in confusion.

"Sure. What's the problem?"

Sunny blinked a few times.

"Now, I don't think you understand. In this scenario, the other person will have the ability to control you. They'll be able to end your life if they want, or force you to do things that you don't want to do. They might not ever use that ability… but they'll have it. You will be at their mercy — always, and absolutely."

Effie continued to stare at him in confusion.

"Yeah. And?"

Sunny was baffled, too.

What was this reaction?

"What do you mean, yeah? That's a serious problem, you know! How can you surrender yourself to someone else, just like that?"

Effie laughed quietly.

"That's just marriage, though?"

Sunny stared at her in complete bewilderment.

"What do you mean?"

Effie smiled and took a sip of her tea, then shrugged.

"Well, what you described simply sounds like marriage — what marriage is supposed to be, at least. Marriage is all about trust, after all. You have to trust your partner, and they have to trust you. Naturally, nothing is absolute, and trust is not absolute either."

She leaned forward and gave him an amused look.

"But, Sunny… imagine entrusting your infant child to someone when you have to leave — defenseless, fragile, vulnerable… infinitely precious. That is what spouses all over the world do every day, and that is the level of trust they have in each other. If I trust my husband

enough to surrender my son to his care, why would I not trust him with my own life? My life seems trifling in comparison."

Effie shook her head and chuckled.

"Trusting them completely, giving them the power to influence what you do, and being at their mercy… always, and absolutely. That's just marriage. You are supposed to surrender to the person you love — that's what love is. So, as long as the feeling is mutual, I don't see what the problem is. Not much of a conundrum, if you ask me."

Sunny just stared at her, completely stunned.

That… was definitely not a perspective he had ever considered before, or had even imagined before.

It was entirely ridiculous, bringing down his mystical existential dilemma down to earth so thoroughly that it suddenly seemed ordinary and mundane, not even worth mentioning.

As if there was no dilemma at all.

'That's just… what love is?'

Surrendering to someone...

Trusting them completely.

Sunny stared at Effie some more, then slowly shook his head.

"You're a crazy woman, you know that?"

Effie scoffed.

"Oh, really? Remind me, which one of us frequents a psychiatrist?"

Sunny took a deep breath and looked down.

He really did not want to answer…

But sadly, he had to.

"...I do."

Effie nodded with satisfaction.

"Exactly, so don't go around pointing fingers at people… especially at crazy people. They might bite it off."

Grinning, she raised her cup and finished her tea.

Outside, a stormy night was falling upon Mirage City.

Chapter-2517: Trust

Everything good had to come to an end.

And so, Sunny's and Effie's last meal in the desolate, but cozy diner had come to an end as well.

They parted ways under the torrential rain that threatened to swallow Mirage City. It seemed unwise to separate while the Castellan was hunting them, but they had to keep playing their roles. Effie had to return to her family… more importantly, they wanted to split the team spying on them in two, so that escaping its surveillance was easier later.

Sunny looked at Effie and lingered for a few moments just before they went their own ways.

"You... be careful."

Effie met his gaze calmly and smiled after a long stretch of silence.

"You too, partner."

With that, she was gone.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then inhaled deeply and started walking. His PTV had been destroyed, the subway system of Mirage City was paralyzed due to the flooding, and there were no taxis around because of the congested roads. So, he headed for the nearest bus stop.

As Sunny walked and then rode on a crowded bus, he kept thinking about what Effie had said.

Surrender yourself to the person you love… trust them completely…

And have faith in them, knowing that they will not abuse the power

you gave them.

Sunny scoffed.

It was easy for Effie to say.

But actually…

Perhaps she was the best person to say it.

After all, out of all his closest friends, Effie was the only one who had a family. She had a husband whom she loved, and who loved her back. They had built a life together and were raising a child — a Transcendent child, at that. It could not have been easy to care for Little Ling… in fact, it must have been uniquely challenging.

No one had ever faced such a challenge before, and yet, the two of them conquered all the obstacles side by side. That must have taken them an immense amount of trust in each other, and judging by how radiant and happy Little Ling was, they were doing a good job.

However, that was not even what qualified Effie to give Sunny that piece of advice.

There was a different reason, as well.

It was easy to forget because of how vibrant and full of vitality Effie was, and because of how vivacious and tremendously vigorous the alluring image of Raised By Wolves was… but she had not always been the tantalizing picture of health and potency she was today.

Effie had spent more than half of her life confined to a wheelchair and barely able to move… in a world that had no patience or mercy for anyone, let alone people whom it considered defective and useless, like her.

It was neither cheap nor easy to keep someone like her alive, and her family had not been affluent — she had a healthy sibling, as well. Taking care of a sick child was a heavy burden, and in the end, it had more or less brought her family to ruin. They loved and cared for her… but they must have resented her quite a lot in their darker moments, as well.

They had all the reasons to abandon her, but they never did. Effie was only alive today because her family had stubbornly refused to give up and instead took care of her, going against ruthlessly pragmatic societal norms at a great personal cost.

She had been completely and utterly powerless and at their mercy, depending on them for her most basic needs… more so than Sunny had ever depended on anyone, Shadow Bond or not.

So, she knew a thing or two about trust… about loving someone who held power over your life in their grasp, and trusting that they would never abuse it.

Exiting the bus and diving into the rain, Sunny sighed.

Sure, Effie did not have all the context — he did not explain to her what the Shadow Bond was and how it worked in detail. However, that might have been for the best.

Maybe… maybe she saw something that he had failed to see, distracted by the mystical runes and a decade worth of scathing, complicated emotions.

Maybe at the root of it all, it was not about a dead god and the shadows he had cast. It was not about a Divine Aspect or its Innate Ability. It was not even about fate, or lack thereof.

It was simply about trust.

Or maybe not.

'What makes one a slave, anyway?'

If a tyrant put a collar on the neck of a powerless man or woman, and then forced them to serve him, they were enslaved. Theirs was a pitiful fate.

But if a knight gave an oath of loyalty to a noble monarch, swearing to serve them faithfully until the day they die, they were noble. Theirs was a virtuous life of esteem and respect.

Both of these paths led to servitude, but one was a curse, while the

other was a blessing.

There were other kinds of devotion, as well.

'I guess, in the end…'

It all came down to choice.

It was choice that separated a slave from a knight, a curse from a blessing.

And Sunny…

Sunny had to make a choice.

He was in a position to make a choice.

Unlike a slave, who had all their choices taken from them.

'Damnation.'

It was late at night when Sunny finally made it to his destination.

He did not return home, though.

Instead, he was standing in front of a moderately affluent apartment complex, checking something on the cracked screen of his primitive communicator.

"Should be the place…"

Effie had gone home, but the Devil Detective… the Devil Detective was not going to be stopped by something as prosaic as being suspended and stripped of his authority as a police officer. He was still going to continue the investigation.

That was why Sunny had pulled some strings, utilizing a few contacts from the Devil Detective's memory, and received an address.

Soon enough, he was standing in front of a particular door, pressing the buzzer.

The man who opened the door looked at him with a bit of wariness

and a bit of confusion.

"Detective Sunless? To what do I owe the pleasure? Is… is there news about Mr. Mordret?"

It was none other than the Other Mordet's personal assistant — the person who knew the most about where the CEO of the Valor Group went and what he did.

"I wanted to ask you a few questions… and yes, there is."

Sunny gave the man an amicable smile.

And then punched him in the stomach.

Chapter-2518: Denial

The roof of the abandoned church had finally given up, so drops of water were falling from the ceiling here and there. There were puddles in the corners of the main hall, as well as behind the altar, but everywhere else was still relatively dry.

The Other Mordret was sitting on one of the benches, studying the stained glass windows curiously. He looked somewhat worse for wear, but mostly fine — his stylish suit was wrinkled and charred in a few places, his hair was wet and disheveled, and he smelled of gasoline and smoke, but there were no serious wounds on his body and no blood on his clothes.

Morgan came over and looked at him darkly, then handed him a bottle of water and a triangular rice roll with tuna filling.

"Here. Eat."

He took the offered food, looked up at her, and smiled.

"Thank you, Morgan. I am... so glad that you are alright."

She stared at him coldly for a few seconds, then silently turned away.

Walking over to a different part of the abandoned church, she studied the psychiatrist, Dr. Saint.

The eerily beautiful woman was just standing near a wall, staring at her hands in a daze. A torrent of pure darkness was swirling around them like a dancing stream, forming into a black knife from time to time.

"You should eat, too."

Morgan handed her another portion of tuna kimbap.

Saint flinched and looked away from the swirling darkness, which caused it to collapse and dissolve without a trace.

"Oh… thank you, Miss Morgan."

She took the triangular snack hesitantly, then struggled to unwrap it.

Morgan studied her clumsy attempts with an aloof expression, then took the rice roll back and cut the plastic wrapping with a nail. It parted easily, and she offered the snack back to Saint in a moment.

"So you've regained some of your powers, huh?"

Saint looked at her with wide eyes.

"W—what? No, I did no such thing."

Morgan scoffed.

"Oh, really? How do you explain that stream of true darkness, then?"

The taciturn beauty smiled timidly.

"That… what is there to explain? Isn't it obvious?"

She sighed.

"I am obviously experiencing audiovisual hallucinations as a result of the psychotic break I suffered due to shock. This is textbook acute stress disorder."

Regaining some confidence, Saint nodded.

"Yes, exactly. It is a reasonable self-deception narrative, to construct a delusion of having destructive supernatural powers when experiencing the feeling of helplessness in a life-threatening situation."

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"Did your self-deception narrative tear a car door clean off to pull that fool over there out of the burning car, as well?"

Saint hesitated for a moment.

"Hysterical strength is a well-documented stress response explained by the sudden release of adrenaline."

Morgan frowned, then pulled a barely recognizable lump of metal from the pocket of her hoodie.

"This revolver tends to disagree. These are not hallucinations, Doctor. You know they aren't."

Saint remained silent for a while, then trembled and raised her chin a little.

"So, what? Do you expect me to believe all those outlandish things Detective Sunless said? How this world is not real, and how he's a demigod… who is also my master?"

Morgan shrugged.

"I have no idea what the Lord of Shadows told you, actually. But it was probably true."

Saint scoffed, then pointed to Mordret.

"Then why does Mr. Mordret not share in this delusion? Is he also under a spell? No, what was it… is he also not a complete person, or has a stalwart attribute that makes him immune to mind attacks?"

Morgan glanced back at the Other Mordret, then shook her head.

"No. Of course not."

She remained silent for a few moments.

"The reason why he refuses to admit the truth is far more prosaic."

Saint frowned.

"And what would that prosaic reason be?"

Morgan smiled darkly.

"You're the therapist. You tell me."

Not getting an answer, she chuckled coldly.

"It is really very simple…"

Morgan crossed her arms and leaned on the wall, looking at the Other Mordret with a somber expression.

"He is simply in denial."

Saint seemed disturbed by that answer, lowering her gaze to the floor.

Morgan lingered for a few moments, then exhaled slowly.

"Well, it is not surprising, if you think about it. He has spent close to two decades in Mirage City… living a beautiful life that he knew was an illusion. Being loved by people whom he knew were not real. He must have had to convince himself to forget the truth, at some point, in order to stay sane."

She looked away from the other incarnation of her brother.

"But he still knows. It is obvious that he has never really forgotten from how he lives. A man such as him should have everything in the world, would be surrounded by amazing people… but actually, Mr. Mordret is a very solitary person. He has no friends, no confidants, no lovers. The only people he is close to are the members of his family, whom he couldn't give up."

Morgan smiled sadly.

"But who am I to judge? Gods know, I had been infatuated by an illusion of family for decades, myself."

She remained silent for a while, then looked down and shook her head.

"Point is, he knows perfectly well that the world around him is not real. He just refuses to admit it, because admitting it would mean giving up the illusion he holds dear. The illusion of us. Speaking the

truth aloud would mean rejecting the premise of his entire life. So, he denies it."

Morgan looked at Mordret and raised her voice a little:

"Isn't that right, dear brother?"

Mordret turned his head and looked at her with a concerned smile.

"Sorry, I am not quite sure what you mean, Morgan. It all sounds very strange. Maybe it would be wise to return to the hospital and continue your treatment? You… you seem a little unwell."

Morgan laughed.

"Do you see, Dr. Saint? You are experiencing hallucinations, Detective Sunless is your patient, and I am an escaped lunatic… but actually, the only person among us who could use your professional help is the one who seems sane. He's the only one who is suffering from delusion."

She remained silent for a while, and then sighed.

"He's still better than the other one, I guess. What a joke…"

Chapter-2519: Deserving the Truth

There was a long stretch of silence. Mordret was enjoying the snack that Morgan had given him, while Saint was simply staring at her. Amused by her aloof gaze, Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"What? Do you want to say something, Dr. Saint?"

The eerily beautiful woman did not speak for a while, then shook her head slightly.

"Why don't you dispel his delusion, then? Go and tell them the supposed truth. Make him confront reality, if you really believe that this world is an illusion."

Morgan smiled faintly.

"I think not. That… would be too cruel, even for me."

Saint let out a joyless laugh.

"Funny, that. What an unexpected display of empathy… weren't you planning to kill him, Miss Morgan?"

Hearing that, Mordret stirred a little. He studied Morgan for a few moments, then smiled tranquilly and returned to his food as if nothing had happened.

Morgan frowned at Saint, but did not respond. Instead, she looked away.

Her expression seemed troubled for a brief moment, even if she hid it almost immediately.

Some time later, she pursed her lips and scoffed.

"You are not wrong. Sure, what the hell… let me at least get something useful out of him, while there is still time."

Walking over to where Mordret was finishing his meal, she sat down on the bench opposite him and studied his face with a dark expression.

"You heard everything, didn't you?"

Mordret gave her another smile.

"I did. I can't say that I am not concerned about your mental state, Morgan… but at least you are talking to your doctor. That is good."

Morgan smiled dangerously.

"You won't admit anything unless I force you, I guess?"

He blinked a few times, seemingly confused.

"Admit what?"

Morgan remained silent for a long while.

Then, she sighed.

"The Morgan you know is a soft, sweet girl from an affluent family — a little bit spoiled and a little bit arrogant at times, but overall mundane. The real Morgan, however… me… is not mundane. I am Transcendent. And therefore, I possess both an Aspect and a Flaw. Do you want to know what my Flaw is, dear brother?"

She took off her gloves slowly, then reached forward and took the water bottle from his hand. Her fingers seemed to leave scratches on the transparent plastic.

"It's that I cut everything I touch. A very troublesome trait, as you can imagine... can't say that it hasn't led to an accident or two, some more regrettable than others."

She slid her index finger across the plastic bottle, and it suddenly fell apart, splashing water onto the floor.

Mordret stared at the cleanly cut bottle incredulously.

"That… is a neat trick! Was that a prop bottle?"

Morgan smiled in response to his lively expression.

"See, there are two possibilities in front of you now. One is that I am a mundane woman suffering from a mental illness. The other is that I am a Saint cursed by a cruel Flaw. You cling to the former and pretend to be ignorant of the latter… but let me help you admit the truth."

Morgan dropped the lower half of the severed bottle.

"Here. I'll give you a choice…"

She lingered for a few moments, her breathing growing heavier, then slowly raised her hand and pressed her index finger lightly against the tender skin of her slender neck.

As if prepared to drag her fingertip across it, mimicking slitting her own throat.

Her smile widened a little, and the hue of her beautiful scarlet eyes seemed to turn a little darker.

"I am immune to my Flaw, usually… but that is only because of my Rank. Funnily enough, now that I am in a mundane body, my own flesh is not durable enough to withstand the sharp edge of my Flaw."

Her gaze turned colder all of a sudden.

"If you still insist on believing that I am delusional, then there is nothing to fear. But if you know that I am telling the truth and don't do anything… then you will watch me die."

Mordret was still watching her with a pleasant smile.

…However, his smile seemed to falter for a split second.

Morgan closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and then slowly opened them again.

"Doing anything will be as good as admitting the truth. So what will it be, dear brother?"

Before Mordret could respond, she put pressure on her finger. Her muscles tensed subtly, showing that she was ready to drag it forcefully across her neck. The finger slid a few centimeters to the right…

But then, it stopped, because Mordet's had shot forward to grab her by the wrist.

A few drops of blood rolled down her slender neck.

Mordret remained motionless for a few moments, looking at Morgan with panicked eyes, then drew a shallow breath and slowly pulled her hand away from her neck.

Morgan smiled, a hint of sadness appearing in her scarlet eyes.

"And there it is. Admission."

Mordret released her wrist and lowered his shaking hand, then looked down with a rattled expression.

After a few moments of silence, he said softly:

"Why would you do that?"

Pulling a luxurious silk pocket square out of his breast pocket, Mordret pressed it gently against the small cut on her neck.

"Please, don't hurt yourself."

Seemingly indifferent to his soft touch, Morgan stared at him somberly for a while.

Eventually, she spoke in an even tone:

"The last time you saw me was when I was what... two years old? And I don't remember you at all. Why do you even care?"

Mordret smiled sadly.

"Because you are my sister, Morgan."

Then, he looked away and let out a sigh.

"But… you are not my Morgan, are you?"

Her sharp gaze finally lost some of its intensity.

Morgan studied Mordret for a few moments.

"Indeed."

Then, she suddenly laughed brightly and looked at Saint.

"Would you look at that? A complete recovery… it's a miracle! Thank you for the advice, Dr. Saint. Oh my, you really are the best psychiatrist in Mirage City…"

Chapter-2520: Other You

Saint did not respond, looking at Mordret with a frozen expression. She seemed stunned by his betrayal…

Before, there was at least one person who refused to share in the insanity. But now, even he was gone, having chosen to join the lunatics.

She was left all alone.

…There was a subtle sense of giving up in her beautiful, glistening eyes.

Morgan shook her head and looked back at Mordret.

"Well, now that all the pretenses are gone, shall we have an honest conversation… dear brother?"

Mordret slowly retracted his hand and looked down.

He stayed silent for a while, his shoulders hanging low. Eventually, he said quietly:

"Sure, of course. Whatever you want, Morgan."

She studied him with an impassive expression.

"Aren't you curious about anything? Don't you have questions for me?"

Mordret slowly shook his head.

Morgan sighed and leaned back a little.

"Well, then, let me bring you up to speed. You've missed a lot of interesting events, after all… granted, regaling you with these tales

might be a bit too cruel a punishment. But then again, you're not exactly innocent, are you?"

Hearing that, Mordret finally looked up.

"What am I guilty of, exactly?"

His tone was tentative.

Morgan smiled darkly.

"I've learned a few interesting things from the detectives. On the day your car was pushed off the bridge, your driver did not just die from the injuries received in the crash, did he? He was killed with a sharp blade… your other half must have held that knife, but you covered for him. That is what you are guilty of."

Mordret's expression grew a little troubled.

"He was… just trying to protect me."

Morgan chuckled.

"I am sure he was. Did you convince yourself that he had thrown you into the Great Mirror to protect you, as well? Come on. I know you are not stupid — you have to be devilishly smart, rather, being his mirror copy."

Mordret did not respond, prompting her to smile derisively.

"I bet there is no point in asking you who the Castellan is. Naturally, he would have kept that information from you — lest you gain full control of the Palace of Imagination and escape."

There was no answer.

Morgan scoffed.

"Let me tell you about how the other Mordret fared in the real world, then. Your life here must have been quite sweet, even if none of it was real. Surrounded by a loving family and living in a peaceful world... you must have hoped that he was having a great time

outside, as well. Ah, but I'll have to disappoint you. He wasn't."

Mordret flinched slightly.

She looked into the distance with a wistful expression.

"I assume you still remember that our real mother passed away. We only had our father left… but when your other self returned to Bastion, Father never really accepted him as his own. There was something seriously wrong with my dear brother, to be fair — he was eerie, off-putting, exceptionally cruel, and knew no remorse whatsoever. The Dreamspawn must have done a real number on you, huh?"

Morgan shook her head.

"The other Mordret was also exceptionally talented, intelligent, and immensely powerful for a mere Awakened. But our father had already doubted his heritage, distrusted him because of the years you spent being raised by the Dreamspawn, and was troubled about his odd personality. So, this exceptional power only made young Mordret seem more dangerous. Soon enough, Clan Valor decided to get rid of him."

Mordret looked down, his face twisted.

Morgan continued:

"So, we killed him. Only he did not really die… and no matter how we tried, he remained alive. In the end, we built an inescapable trap for him instead. It is funny, really — you are the one who is supposed to be imprisoned, but actually, he was the one who ended up in a cage. And it was a far less comfortable cage than the Palace of Imagination, mind you."

She sighed.

"Oh, but he massacred his guards and escaped the inescapable prison eventually. After that, he became a Master, then a Saint. He conspired with our enemies to destroy us, perpetrated one horrific massacre after another, and rampaged across the two worlds like a bloodthirsty beast."

Morgan smiled darkly.

"What else is there to say? Oh… our father is dead, by the way. Beheaded at the end of a wasteful war he had started. Ki Song is dead, too. Bastion has a new master, and Clan Valor is no more. You and me — both of you — are all that's left, apart from a few members of the branch families."

Mordret drew in a shaky breath.

He remained silent for a while, then suddenly raised his head and looked at Morgan.

"What about the Dreamspawn?"

She lingered for a few moments.

"He was betrayed by our father and sealed away. No one has seen or heard from him in a long, long while."

Mordret let out a small sigh.

"I see. That is… good, I guess."

Morgan studied him intently, then said evenly:

"Now, it is time for me to ask questions."

She leaned forward a little and smiled.

"I shared what my Flaw is with you, so it's only fair to ask. You… you've been split in half, haven't you? That is why there are two of you — two halves of the same whole. A good twin and a bad twin. A man and his hideous reflection. Is that your Flaw? Which one of you is the real Mordret, and which one of you is the reflection?"

Mordret looked at her with a sad smile.

He remained silent for a while, and then shook his head.

"No, you are wrong."

He paused, then sighed and leaned back.

"Both of us are real, and our Flaw did not split us in half. Instead, it shattered us… it shattered into seven pieces."

Morgan blinked a couple of times, stunned.

"What? There are… there are seven of you?"

Mordret's smile dimmed.

He lingered for a few moments, and then said in a mournful tone:

"There were seven of us. In the beginning… but now, there are only two."

Chapter-2521: Broken Mirror

Mordret remained silent for a while.

Eventually, he sighed and looked up, at the colorful windows of the abandoned church… the church of Mirage, the Demon of Imagination.

As if mourning the illusion of her creation that he was choosing to forsake.

Still looking up, he spoke in a wistful tone:

"We were four when our father handed us to the Dreamspawn. That was soon after America fell, and both Immortal Flame and his daughter perished. Father… wasn't quite himself back then. Not that I remember it well."

Mordret hesitated for a few moments.

"I… don't think he ever liked us that much, even if I don't know why. Granted, we were indeed an odd child — in more senses than one. We were born with a rare condition that reversed the location of our organs, for example. And we did not learn to speak for a long while, unlike normal children. In fact, it wasn't long after we spoke our first word that we became the Dreamspawn's ward."

Morgan smiled darkly.

"I don't think you should be worried on that account. Our father did not really like anyone that much, an odd child or not."

Mordret gave her a furtive glance.

"In any case… they were both mere Masters back then. I spent a couple of years with the Dreamspawn and his followers in the waking

world. We moved a lot, exploring all four Quadrants and South America. We even went on an expedition to Europe, exploring the ruins of old human cities. Then, after the Dreamspawn became Transcendent, he took me to the Dream Realm. I haven't been to the waking world since."

Morgan leaned forward a little.

"What was he like? The Dreamspawn?"

Mordret lingered with the answer, then shook his head.

"He was strangely detached, but full of curiosity. Determined, driven… as if searching for something. Everything on Earth seemed to amuse him a little. Looking back, there were too many odd things both about him and about his followers — but I did not know any better. For me, that was simply how things were. I just… languished because of his indifference, and longed for his attention."

He sighed.

"In the Dream Realm, it was often just the two of us. The Dreamspawn had a Citadel and Awakened retainers, but he spent most of his time exploring ancient ruins in the faraway regions of the Dream Realm… and he took me with him. Me and his most loyal servants, that was — some of them were Echoes of Nightmare Creatures, some of them were Echoes of people. A quiet bunch, to say the least."

Mordret smiled bitterly.

"Back then, I convinced myself that he took me with him because he cared about me above everyone else. And he did — just not in the way I believed. I was simply too valuable to be entrusted to anyone. Because there was something he needed from me."

He looked down.

"In any way, eventually, I turned twelve and faced my First Nightmare. That was when I gained my Aspect and my Flaw, and was shattered into seven pieces."

Mordret inhaled deeply.

"We were seven shards of the same person. Each of us inherited some aspects of the original Mordret, but none of us was... whole. We were all incomplete. Missing parts that we remembered, but did not possess or were capable of anymore."

His gaze grew distant.

Mordret remained silent for a while, then exhaled slowly.

"Who knows? Maybe if things had turned out differently, we could have learned to live that way. We could have learned to rely on each other and make up for what the other ones lacked. We could have acted as a single person who possessed the strength of seven, and the companionship of his missing parts."

His expression turned somber.

"...But that was not meant to be. Once we conquered the Nightmare, the Dreamspawn took what he needed from us — the blood of War God — and abandoned us callously. He did it easily and emotionlessly, as if we never mattered to him at all. And so, we were left alone. That was when my… other self made his choice."

Mordret looked away with a regretful expression.

"Instead of learning how to live with the rest of us, he decided to make himself whole — as whole as he could be. So, he killed the rest."

A dead silence settled in the abandoned church.

Morgan stared at Mordret, her face pale. She did not say anything for a long while, and then asked, a hint of a bewildered smile appearing on her face:

"So, when you were twelve… one of your slaughtered the others?"

Mordret nodded slowly.

"It sounds like a decision that only a monster can make, but please

understand. All of us were limited by what we were still capable of feeling, thinking, and being. And he… he was not the most compassionate piece of us. He was the strongest, though, and best-suited to be a protector."

Mordret sighed.

"Maybe he did protect us, in a way. In a cruel, terrible way. He killed the other five and absorbed them, regaining as many parts of the original Mordret as he could and coming very close to becoming a complete person once again. However… he could not kill me. Not because he was incapable of overpowering me, but simply because one of the parts of the original Mordret I inherited was our death."

Mordret closed his eyes for a moment.

"If I die, we all die… but you must have realized that already. That was why you tried to kill me, wasn't it, Morgan? In any case, that saved me back then. I was the weakest and most vulnerable of us — there are many things I lack, and their absence renders me all but harmless. Which is a death sentence in this world we live in, more or less. So, it is quite ironic that it was I who inherited our death. Almost as ironic as our protector killing us all."

He smiled faintly.

"He must have given you a reason to want to kill him, but please understand. He is still not a complete person, you see. He has regained much of what a human should possess, but not all of it. There is one missing part in particular that lies at the root of what he has become… one small deficiency that influences everything else."

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"And that is?"

Mordret sighed.

"...It's regret. While I am capable of feeling it, my other self is not. He is incapable of regretting anything, and like the first domino, that one missing piece causes much of his claim to being a real human to crumble."

He looked at Morgan with a sad smile.

"But he… he still wanted to come to Bastion. To find his home again. To belong somewhere again. And he did — he just made sure to hide me somewhere where no one would be able to find me first. So, he hid me under Bastion, in this place."

Mordret rubbed his face tiredly.

"And here we are."

Chapter-2522: An Old Story

"Here you are."

Sitting on a plastic chair in a cheap tent bar, Sunny smiled.

There were no other customers under the flimsy canopy — and no wonder. With how violent the rain had become and how cold the winds were, most people of Mirage City were huddling at home. Others were in the process of abandoning the flooded areas, so they had more important things to do than stop at a cheap eatery in the middle of a stormy night.

Even the usual drunks were nowhere to be seen… nevertheless, Sunny was not at all surprised to see the clasp being pulled open as someone came in from the rain.

The man looked around the empty tent, then gave him a pleasant smile.

"Ah… were you waiting? It breaks my heart a little to see how predictable I have become."

Pulling up a plastic chair, Mordret sat opposite Sunny and took off his cap. Drops of water fell from his hair, and he brushed it back, shivering from the cold in his threadbare coat.

Sunny pointed to an unopened bottle of soju standing on the table between them.

"Here. Warm yourself up."

Mordret obliged, then gave him a curious look.

"You're not drinking?"

Sunny gave him a friendly smile.

"The last time I got drunk, I killed someone. So…"

His smile widened a little.

"I thought that if I were to kill you, I'd rather do it sober. You know, to fully enjoy the process."

Mordret chuckled and poured himself a glass, then emptied it in a single gulp.

"So how did you know that I'd come find you again, Sunless?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"It's obvious. We have your other self, after all. You'd want to get him back at all costs, lest Morgan actually finishes him off."

He leaned back and sighed.

"Of course, I did not really know who you would choose to follow — me or Effie. But I had an inkling that it would be me."

Mordret studied him for a while, then shrugged.

"Quite astute. Oh, I saw you visiting the other's assistant earlier… I hope you got what you wanted from him?"

Sunny nodded.

"I did, I did. I know who is trying to kill us now."

Mordret raised an eyebrow.

"Really? That was fast."

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, I have an advantage or two when it comes to solving this case."

He looked away with a wistful expression.

"Actually, pinpointing the assistant as the traitor who kept supplying the mastermind with sensitive information was not that hard. On the

day of the first assassination attempt, Mordret changed his plans randomly, but his schedule and route were still leaked. The same happened yesterday. Who had immediate access to that information in both cases, though? Two people, really: the driver and the assistant. Coincidentally, the assistant was the one who drove Mordret yesterday, so he was the only suspect left."

Mordret winced.

"You know, it is quite unpleasant to hear you refer to that man as Mordret. Insulting, even. I disapprove."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments.

"Well, tough."

He leaned back.

"In any case, the assistant had some information, but not all of the information. Getting it out of him was not too hard, and piecing it all together wasn't too difficult either… not because I am a genius detective, but because I know more than people in this city know."

He sighed.

"In this story that the Castellan created… what is the connection between the victims of the Nihilist? How do we, the uninvited guests, fit into it? Who wants to kill Mordret? And most importantly — why now? It is all a proper mess, and finding what ties it all together is not simple at first glance. Oh, but it is all tied together. Just in an unexpected way."

Mordret smiled.

"It seems you really do have a suspect in mind."

Sunny nodded.

"Yes, but... sorry to disappoint, it is not someone exciting. It is, in fact, the most boring contender — the most obvious one, too, whom everyone would suspect from the very start. It's the Chairman of the Board… the reflection of your dead uncle, Madoc."

Mordret seemed a little surprised. It was impossible to tell if his surprise was genuine or if he had known the answer already, though.

"Uncle dearest? How nefarious! To think that he would conspire against his own nephew... ah, but it is a story as old as the world itself. A scorned uncle conspiring to oust a noble prince. A simple power grab… quite trite."

Sunny shook his head.

"It is Madoc, yes. But a power grab? No. The power will simply return to his brother's hands if Mordret dies, after all. So, he had a different motive. He is desperately trying to bury his own sins."

He watched as Mordret poured himself more soju with a look of envy, then looked away.

"The thread I needed to pull to realize the truth was not whom Madoc tried to silence, but the timing of it all. And for that, I simply needed to get the details of what Mordret has been doing for the last few days out of his assistant. So, do you want to know what provoked all this? Was it his policies? The clash of interests over the Valor Group's future? A political agenda, perhaps?"

Sunny shook his head with a smile of dark amusement.

"No… it was all because Mordret unexpectedly decided to implement flood prevention measures in the city."

Mordret raised an eyebrow.

"Does Madoc want the city to suffer more water damage to inflate the numbers in the repair contracts Valor Construction will receive after the floods are over?"

Sunny shook his head again.

"Not quite. But it does have to do with Valor Construction… that is where the skeletons are buried. Are being buried, actually, and would have been flawlessly hidden if not for the fact that Mordret suddenly threw a wrench into these plans. By requesting Valor Construction to mobilize its forces before the floods, he inadvertently gave himself a

reason to look at it closely."

He sighed.

"The reason Madoc is trying to kill Mordret is because Mordret inevitably noticed a slight discrepancy in the numbers presented by the Valor Construction in their report about the flood prevention efforts… and ordered a full audit to be conducted."

Sunny smiled wistfully.

"It is as they say, I guess. No good deed goes unpunished."

Mordret chuckled.

"Oh, I wouldn't know. I am not known for doing good deeds, personally."

He paused for a moment and then asked:

"So what is it that the Chairman of the Board is so desperate to cover?"

Sunny shrugged.

"What else? Embezzlement."

He remained silent for a while, and then looked north.

"It's not the fact of the embezzlement that is important, though, it's what he embezzled the funds from. The last major project of Valor Construction… the restoration of the northern dam."

Sunny sighed.

"Which would not have been a problem, if not for these abnormally heavy rains. Because of them, the northern dam is not going to hold."

He looked at Mordret with a neutral expression.

"Mirage City is going to drown."

Chapter-2523: Art Imitates Life

Sunny took the soju bottle and poured Mordret a glass. Of course, he made sure to hold it with one hand while doing so, since holding it with both would have been too polite.

Pushing the glass toward the Prince of Nothing, he leaned back and pursed his lips.

"There was no Nihilist originally. It was just Mirage City hunting down the reflections of your vessels to erase an anomaly. Things have changed after the rest of us arrived, and now, these murders have an actual explanation. Funnily enough… there is still no Nihilist anywhere out there. The dreadful serial killer terrorizing the entire city does not exist."

Sunny shook his head with a resentful expression.

"He is just a cover story Madoc has concocted to direct everyone's attention away from the truth. And the truth is that these people were killed by professionals he had hired to silence them — to tie up loose ends. Just like he hired enforcers to kill his nephew and us. The missing eyes are just a red herring… whatever the hell a herring is… meant to distract the public."

He sighed.

"If you study the backgrounds of the victims, all of them have a connection to the Valor Group. The owner of a building company handling several contracts with Valor Construction, an archivist from an enterprise that provided outsourcing services to the Valor Group, a security guard who was recently reassigned from the renovation site… and so on. Each of them can be traced to Valor Construction and the Northern Dam contract it received from the city."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"So is Mordret. So are two detectives who were sniffing around both him and the supposed serial killer victims. So is Morgan, who must have known something about her uncle's shady dealings… and her psychiatrist. After all, who knows what Morgan let slip in her lengthy therapy sessions with Saint, confined in a mental asylum and pumped full of drugs?"

Mordret looked at him with interest.

"That Saint… what an interesting person. I did not know that there was another human with the affinity to Nothing somewhere out there. Ah, I would not mind getting to know her better, if fortune allows."

Sunny stared at his smile for a few moments, then reached forward and pushed his glass over without changing expression.

Not paying the spilled soju any attention, he said in an even tone:

"Anyway, all of the people Madoc killed or tried to kill can be traced to the Northern Dam renovation project. Of course, that alone does not mean anything — all of them can be traced to a great number of things. Chocolate milk, for example. Or the Police Department… or Mordret himself. Human lives are like that. All of us share countless connections, and anyone can be tied to anything in this colossal web."

Unless some misguided fool went and met a nasty bird that severed all these connections. Then, a person would become untraceable… and easily lost.

Sunny smiled.

"Pinpointing a particular connection between all these threads as the reason for what is happening is nearly impossible in a short amount of time — let alone proving it. But I have the advantage of foreknowledge."

He moved his chair a little back to prevent the spilled soju from dripping on him.

"Mirage City is not exactly Bastion, but it is clearly inspired by it. There is the Mirror Lake and the Castle… there is also Rivergate,

even if it is situated a bit closer to the city. The northern dam does not exist in Bastion, though — in the false Bastion, at least. It does exist in True Bastion, turned to ruin. There is another difference between the two, as well: the drowned city at the bottom of the lake."

He let out a wistful sigh.

"The northern dam was destroyed in True Bastion, and the resulting flood destroyed the city. Art imitates life… the story the Castellan seems to be telling draws inspiration from the ancient past, as well. After all, the Castellan is a reflection that has dwelled in the Great Mirror from before the moon above True Bastion was shattered. It witnessed the destruction of the dam and the fall of the city below personally."

Sunny shrugged.

"So, that was how I was able to piece together the clues and realize what was going on. Madoc has embezzled the funds from the renovation project for whatever reason… maybe he needed to create a slush fund, bribe his way into a political career, or buy himself a new yacht. In any case, the work Valor Construction performed on the dam was shoddy at best, maybe even harmful. Now, the entire city is in jeopardy, and he is silencing everyone who can expose his guilt."

Mordret chuckled.

"Excellent detective work, Sunless… no, truly, I am impressed. You did not exactly have a lot of time to investigate the case, and half of it has been spent fighting hired killers and surviving deadly car crashes. How exciting! It is almost like the old detective stories I used to read as a kid."

Sunny was a little disturbed by that statement, reminded that Mordret too had been a human once.

He grimaced.

"Thank you. Being a detective is quite a new experience for me, but I know a thing or two about crime. I have not always been a law-

abiding citizen, after all… so, I know how criminals think."

He took a deep breath, then looked at Mordret.

"So, now we simply have to take Madoc off the board. Once he is gone, the Castellan will have to reveal itself — to make one last attempt to prevent its illusion from crumbling."

Mordret smiled amicably.

"That won't be easy. Uncle Madoc must have hidden himself in some impregnable fortress by now, surrounded by an army of hired thugs. Getting to him will be difficult, let alone arresting him… so, what is your plan?"

Sunny smiled, too.

"Why, it's very simple."

He pointed to Mordret.

"I am planning to use you as bait."

Chapter-2524: The Wise and Benevolent Prince Mordret

Mordret laughed.

"Me? Goodness gracious… I don't even officially exist in this reality. How are you going to make me into bait?"

Sunny grinned.

"How else? By dressing you in a fancy suit and giving you some hair gel, of course. You will take the place of your nicer self and draw Madoc out. Naturally, your life will be in grave danger when you do… but that is a risk I am quite willing to take."

He let out a dreamy sigh.

"Actually, I am looking forward to it."

Mordret picked up his overturned glass and emptied the rest of the bottle into it. Taking a sip, he gave Sunny an amused look.

"But what's in it for me?"

Sunny shrugged.

"That is negotiable, but… look at yourself. You can put on a brave face, but it is obvious that your time here in the Palace of Imaginations has not been pleasant. I don't think I ever saw you in such a sorry state. Staying alive while the entire Mirage City is hunting you has not been easy, has it? So are you really in a position to make demands?"

Mordret laughed.

He savored his drink, then gave Sunny a curious glance.

"Have you really not entered the Great Mirror to kill me?"

Sunny grimaced, uncomfortable with having to answer that question. It threatened to reveal too much of his secrets to Mordret, which was never a good thing.

"I did not even know that you could be killed outside a soul duel before meeting your better half. So, no."

Mordret considered something for a few moments.

"But now that you know, you probably would not mind killing me. Isn't that the case?"

'Damnation.'

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

"Sure. There are too many reasons to kill you, and too few to keep you alive. Please don't take offense... actually, please do. I meant it as an insult."

Mordret chuckled and finished his drink in one gulp.

"Well, you are wrong. The reasons to keep me alive might be few, but they outweigh the countless reasons to be rid of me that you and Changing Star seem to have. In fact… forget about why you came here. Why do you think I came here, Sunless?"

Sunny frowned.

"Wasn't it to stop Morgan from carving your other self's heart out?"

Mordret slowly shook his head.

"That was a reason, but not the reason… in truth, I would have come here even if Morgan had not learned about his existence."

He looked Sunny right in the eye and smiled.

"Gods… you really have no idea, do you? How troubling."

Sunny's frown deepened.

"I do have an idea. In fact, I have several ideas — and the more you keep talking in circles, the more ideas I get."

Mordret sighed and looked away.

In a rare moment of sincerity, his mask of decorum slipped, revealing a hint of some somber emotion, as well as unease.

Then, he put his polite smile back on.

"Allow me to enlighten you, then. I've been quite heartbroken to learn that you managed to kill my father before I could, Sunless. So heartbroken, in fact, that I was considering doing something unwise to get back at you. Something childish and vindictive… like annihilating the entire Sword Domain or turning NQSC into a graveyard before slowly pulling you limb from limb."

While Sunny's expression turned dark, his smile widened a little.

"Ah, but I quickly regained my senses. Sure, it pained me a great deal to have my vengeance stolen from me… but I am nothing if not a pragmatist. The goal I chose to make the purpose of my existence was gone. So, like the wise and benevolent man that I am, I decided to look to the future instead of dwelling on the past."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Oh? You sure it wasn't because pulling a Sovereign limb from limb posed a bit of a problem to your benevolent self?"

Mordret laughed.

"Ah, indeed. Despite my anger, the prospect of making two new Supremes my sworn enemies did not seem too enticing."

Sunny studied him for a while.

"So, what was the future you envisioned for yourself? Did you find a new goal?"

Mordret shrugged.

"It is too soon to speak about new goals. I have to ensure my safety first. My actions, you see, are a matter of necessity at the moment — not of choice."

Sunny scowled.

"What the hell do you mean? What necessity?"

Mordret chuckled…

His laughter did not sound very joyous, though.

"Think about it. I hid my Flaw — my one weakness — in this secretive place. Not even my father knew about his existence or about the Palace of Imagination. You learned about my Flaw from Morgan, while Morgan learned it from the legacy left behind by Ki Song. But how did Ki Song know about it, not to mention where to find it?"

Sunny looked at him somberly.

"I don't know. I assumed it was through some form of divination… perhaps Death Singer had lent a hand."

Mordret shook his head.

"No, it wasn't divination. Someone simply told her about it. Someone who knows more about me than anyone else, and with whom she could bargain to keep my father in check."

Sunny tensed.

The person Mordret was hinting at could be only one man.

"You mean… the third Sovereign."

Mordret smiled sharply.

"Indeed. The Dreamspawn knows my weakness very well. He knows a great deal of things… in fact, I am not sure if there is anything he does not know."

His voice sounded a bit strange. If Sunny did not know Mordret better, he would have believed that the bastard was… afraid.

But, of course, that was impossible.

"So what does it have to do with you coming to the Palace of Imagination?"

Mordret shrugged.

"It's simple. My Flaw has been safe here until now, but not anymore."

He lingered for a few moments, and then added with a chilling smile:

"Because the Dreamspawn is coming. And when he does, no one in the world — any world — will be safe anymore."

Chapter-2525: The Dreamspawn Cometh

A heavy silence settled in the tent bar, broken only by the muted rustle of the rain outside. The mention of the nebulous Sovereign, Asterion, caused the chill of the night to feel colder, and the darkness in the corners of the bar to seem darker… even though both Sunny and Mordret had avoided mentioning his name.

After all, those who knew of his existence all believed that the Dreamspawn could hear his name being spoken aloud, no matter where and when it was spoken.

Even knowing about him could attract his attention.

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"The Dreamspawn… oh my, what a scarecrow."

He leaned back, relaxing on his plastic chair, and shrugged.

"I've been hearing scary stories about this man for decades now. But is he really that frightening? From what I could tell, his only claim to glory was joining your father in betraying Broken Sword. Even then, they just barely managed to kill him."

Mordret shook his head.

"I think you misunderstand something, Sunless. It wasn't that the Dreamspawn joined my father… my dear father only dared to turn on Broken Sword because he had struck a deal with the Dreamspawn. Which, albeit it pains me to admit, is not at all an indication of my father's weakness — rather, Broken Sword was simply that much of a monster."

He smiled pleasantly.

"I should know. After all, I was the price my father paid to ensure the Dreamspawn's support. And because of that, Broken Sword ended up dead despite all his dire power."

He shrugged.

"You are quite a treacherous person yourself, Sunless, so you should know that the means one uses to achieve victory do not matter too much. The only thing that matters is who is left standing at the end of the battle — that is the only true measure of power. The Dreamspawn might have used cunning and treachery to kill Broken Sword, but he still killed him. Which means that, in the end, he was a deadlier monster."

Sunny could not argue that point.

Still, he felt reluctant to agree.

"Sure, cunning and deviousness are a part of one's power. But what of it? How diabolical could that guy have been if he ended up being outplayed and trapped on the Moon by his allies?"

He smirked.

"Gods. Who's to say that he is still alive, even? That mysterious boogeyman everyone seems to be terrified of might have died years ago. There is a Category Six Gate on the Moon, after all… or maybe something even more unfathomable. Which means that there is an Unholy horror guarding that Gate. Even if the nature of the waking world is suppressing its powers, I find it hard to believe that your Dreamspawn has survived decades in the domain of an Unholy abomination."

Mordret smiled faintly.

"Oh, he's alive. Of that, I have no doubt."

He looked at Sunny with a strange darkness hiding in his gaze.

"And the two of you — you and your own Dreamspawn — have made

a fatal mistake. I cannot in good conscience blame you, though… in truth, his return became inevitable the moment the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms fell. Do you think that he is staying on the Moon of his own free will? No, of course not. He could have escaped it a long time ago, if not for the fact that they were suppressing him all this time, and preventing his insidious influence from spreading back to Earth."

Mordret sighed.

"However, the only two people who could shield the world from him are gone now. Changing Star, you, and even me — we simply do not know enough about the Dreamspawn and his powers to take their place in time. We do not have the benefit of having thoroughly prepared to contain him, either. So, he is coming… in fact, I am willing to bet that his influence has already started spreading both across the waking world and the Dream Realm."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Who says that we haven't prepared?"

He sighed and looked away.

"Naturally, we are no fools. We suspected that a confrontation with the third Sovereign was inevitable, too — so, we have been looking for signs of his return ourselves. Of course, it has not been easy due to the fact that merely knowing about him puts our agents in danger… but we have been looking."

That was one of the purposes — perhaps the main purpose — of the Shadow Clan. Sunny had created a vast information network that spanned both worlds, serving as his eyes and ears, precisely because he wanted to know about Asterion showing up as soon as possible.

The members of the Shadow Clan did not know what they were looking for themselves, for safety reasons, but that did not prevent them from reporting all odd and suspicious things they had noticed to Sunny, as well as serving as conduits of his shadow sense.

In fact, he was going to receive the next report soon, now that the

busy days of the winter solstice were behind them.

Mordret looked at him with an amused smile.

"Then you have not been looking well enough."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"The Dreamspawn… what is he like?"

Mordret studied him for a long while, then took a deep breath and let out a short laugh.

"Oh, him? Well, if I were to describe him succinctly... I'd say that he is a mirror image of your Changing Star. A being very much like her, but also the exact opposite of her and what she stands for, like the dark side of a brilliant sun. Or maybe he is what Changing Star was supposed to be, taken to the logical conclusion."

Sunny scowled, surprised and unnerved by that answer.

"What do you mean?"

Mordret gave him a somber look.

"You know what a Dreamspawn is, don't you? A being born of both worlds, belonging to neither. Someone walking on the edge between a human and a Nightmare Creature."

Sunny's scowl deepened. That was one way to interpret it. Nephis was no Nightmare Creature, but in some sense, she did share a degree of… kinship with them.

That was the reason why she could absorb a portion of the soul fragments of the abominations who died to her flames, just like Awakened who killed other Awakened could.

"What of it?"

Mordret smiled darkly.

"Well, it seems to me that both of them have taken the burden of

being a Dreamspawn to an extreme end. Changing Star denied the Nightmare part of her so thoroughly as to become the very symbol of humanity. Completely incorruptible. "

He looked at Sunny and added in a lower tone:

"That man, however — the first and original Dreamspawn — did the opposite. He doesn't care about being human at all… in fact, I don't think he even considers himself a human. Instead, he has accepted the creature part of him with open arms… and among all creatures, he is the most terrifying one of all. He is the kind of creature who walks around wearing a human face."

Sunny shivered.

'I think... I am starting to understand how Mordret ended up being who he is...'

Chapter-2526: Nightmare Spawn

Sunny looked at Mordret in displeasure.

Now, even he was starting to feel a little uneasy at the mention of Asterion.

He was also a little stunned.

The idea of a human who considered himself a spawn of Nightmare had never crossed his mind. Even more disturbing was the fact that Asterion had an actual claim to such a title.

Mordret chuckled.

"It is not that surprising if you think about it. What is a human, after all? There are some common traits we all share, like having two hands and two feet… being featherless bipeds. However, does a Saint cease to be a human when they assume their Transcendent form? Hardly. In truth, we also share more profound things. Our way of thinking, culture, values… our birthplace."

He sighed.

"But that man was born in a different world, and raised by people who had quite a peculiar culture and values. More than that, he was unique even among them — the first of his kind. The first human child born in the Dream Realm… the first Dreamspawn. He only encountered human civilization after becoming Awakened. So, it's not that hard to imagine that he would consider himself a stranger to our merry band. Oh, and I am using 'our' figuratively. In truth, I feel somewhat like a stranger to mankind myself."

Sunny offered him a half-hearted smile.

"So what you are telling me is that while Nephis is a Dreamspawn, that man is better described as a Nightmare Spawn."

Mordret shrugged.

"A Dream Spawn, a Nightmare Spawn… is there really a difference? In the world we live in, the two are one and the same."

Sunny pursed his lips.

"There is a difference. Names have a power, you know… regardless, I am more interested in something else. That man, whatever we call him — is he actually Corrupted?"

Mordret hesitated for a while.

"I am not quite sure. These Dreamspawns are all paradoxical creatures, you know. I do not think that he is truly Corrupted. I believe that he is still walking the Path of Ascension. However, who can tell? He might be a human who is walking the Path of Corruption, or a Corrupted man who is walking the Path of Ascension. Or maybe there is no difference between the two for him at all."

He grinned.

"If I knew that much about the Dreamspawn, I wouldn't be here, desperately trying to prepare for his return. I can tell you one thing, though…"

Mordret looked at Sunny with a smile.

"Of all the people in both worlds, I am the one who knows the most about him. So, coming back to the question that provoked this unpleasant conversation… the reason neither you nor Changing Star can afford to kill me is that I am your best ally in the fight against the Dreamspawn."

That soured Sunny's mood quite a lot.

He was feverishly digesting the new information about Asterion. Sunny had known that the third Sovereign would become a problem

sooner or later… however, after hearing Mordret out, he was inclined to believe the bastard.

The problem would arrive sooner rather than later. And the danger posed by Asterion was perhaps even greater than Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had anticipated.

Worse of all…

No matter how much Sunny was revolted by the idea, he could not deny Mordret's last statement. They could not afford to exterminate their best source of information about Asterion, at least not just yet.

Killing Mordret would be a mistake, despite how much of a loose cannon he was and all the terrible crimes he had committed. They could make him answer for those after Asterion had been dealt with, regardless.

On top of that… Sunny was still not entirely comfortable with the idea of killing the Other Mordret in cold blood just to get rid of this one. That guy was innocent, having done nothing wrong — nothing to justify an execution, anyway.

Sunny had killed plenty of people in his life, and was not above doing what had to be done in order to achieve his goals. But he was not entirely callous, either — so, he felt undecided on what to do with the Other Mordret.

And that, without a doubt, was another fact Mordret was counting on.

'That slippery bastard…'

Sunny looked at the Prince of Nothing somberly.

"I might — just might — consider keeping you alive. However, you should think about giving me a taste of what you are offering, to help me make the decision. What powers does Asterion possess? What is his Aspect? What is his Flaw? Why is he searching for Divine Lineages? And so on."

Mordret laughed.

"So many questions."

He lingered for a while, then spoke in a distant tone, as if musing aloud:

"Let's not mention his ability to manipulate and compel living beings, as well as to know things that are not supposed to be known. That is his Aspect — at least I suspect that it is — but not his nature. His nature, meanwhile…"

Mordret frowned slightly.

"The Dreamspawn bears the lineage of the most elusive of the gods — Heart God, the God of Souls. As well as emotions, memory, growth… and hunger. So, he wields an eerie power to consume and assimilate things. That is what makes him a monster. He is... a chimera."

Sunny blinked a few times.

"Wait, you don't mean that…"

Mordret nodded.

"Yes. It is not supposed to be possible, just like the existence of beings who are both divine and profane is not supposed to be possible, but the Dreamspawn is capable of bearing several Lineages at the same time. He inherited the lineage of Heart God from his parents… he assimilated the lineage of War God from my blood. He received the lineage of Beast God from Ki Song, and plundered the lineage of Storm God from Nightwalker."

He chuckled.

"He kept Nephis of Immortal Flame alive because he needed her to grow up and Awaken to steal the lineage of Sun God. And he has waited for a long, long time for the lineage of Shadow God to finally reveal itself. For you to reveal yourself. So, now that all he seeks is within reach, he will inevitably come for the two of you… to finish his collection and absorb all six Divine Lineages. What for? That, I do not know."

Mordret looked at Sunny and raised an eyebrow.

"How's that for a taste? Ah, am I not a generous and benevolent person? Look, I turned a new leaf. That is the second time I shared valuable information with you for free."

Sunny remained silent for a long while.

'The good thing is that my incarnations can sense what is happening in Mirage City. So, they'll be relaying this information to Nephis and Cassie immediately.'

After a while, he sighed.

"Fine. Let's strike a deal, you and I. What do you want in exchange for acting as bait to lure the Castellan out, and helping us deal with the Dreamspawn in the future?"

Mordret shrugged.

"It is as I said. I want safety. Ensure the survival of my pathetic other self — put him in a place more secure than the Palace of Imagination. The safest place in both worlds… settle him on the Ivory Island, and guard him as fervently as you guard each other, both from the Dreamspawn and from Morgan. Actually, from anything that can harm him even a little bit."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"You want us — Nephis, Cassie, and me — to become… roommates with your other self? That is your price?"

Mordret smiled pleasantly.

"Quite aptly put. Yes… at least until the Dreamspawn is dealt with. I know, cohabitating with that worm is an unpleasant prospect, but please bear with him for a while."

Sunny frowned.

He wasn't sure that Mordret was being sincere… in fact, he was quite certain that the bastard was deceiving him, somehow.

But there was one thing Sunny knew for sure…

It was that Mordret absolutely detested Asterion. A long time ago, the Prince of Nothing had shared his intentions with him — he had wanted revenge against the Dreamspawn almost as much as he wanted to avenge himself on Valor.

That made his motives at least a little bit believable.

'In fact, he is giving us a hostage.'

What would that lunatic be able to do if his very death was in their hands?

Nothing.

Sunny looked at Mordret somberly for a long while, then sighed.

"It's a deal."

Chapter-2527: Scent of Rain

Some time prior, Effie returned home… the home of her counterpart, which felt both familiar and strange.

It was different from her own family home in Bastion, but shared the same feeling of coziness with it. The nature of life in Mirage City was vastly different from the real world, of course… but Effie vaguely remembered how her counterpart had lived, which was why she did not feel particularly alien to this fantastical place.

If anything, she felt a little bit too at home here.

The people quietly following her in the shadows were troublesome…

It was the people inside, however, who were the problem.

Opening the door, Effie took off her coat and shook off the drops of water from her hair. By the time she was done with that, the sound of little feet drumming excitedly on the floor was already drawing near.

"Mommy!"

She put on a smile.

Her children… her counterpart's children… were upon her a moment later. She crouched to hug them, burying her face in their soft hair.

"Mommy's home!"

"Mama! It was raining a lot, mama!"

The boy was a little older, while the little girl was still a toddler. He was boisterous, while she was shy. Both of them were full of the irresistible, innocent sweetness that only children possessed.

Neither of them were real.

Effie kept reminding herself of that fact, but it was of no use. Cold rationality was powerless in the face of blazing emotions, and it was especially powerless in the face of those fundamental feelings that lay at the foundation of human nature.

Like the affection a mother felt for her children.

Despite only knowing them for a few days, she did not want to let these kids go. She couldn't.

"Hey, you rascals. Your mom had a very long day. Give me a minute to catch my breath."

The kids reluctantly let go of her and took a couple of steps back. The girl looked up at her with wide eyes, which suddenly began to water for no good reason.

'Uh-oh.'

"Mama… d—did you get an ouchie?"

Effie looked down at herself. She had been in pretty bad shape after the car crash, but most of her bruises and contusions were out of view. There were a few scrapes on her arms and face, though, covered by adhesive bandage.

She smiled and patted her daughter's head.

"Yes… but just a tiny one."

Then, she winked at the little girl.

"Mama is too awesome to get really hurt, pumpkin."

The boy clenched his fists.

"Our mom is the awesomest mom in the world! Of course she won't get hurt!"

Effie laughed.

"Alright, settle down. Let's prepare you for bed…"

The kids protested in unison:

"Noooo! I want ice cream first!"

"I want to watch cartoons!"

She let out a theatrical sigh.

"No ice cream before bed. Where did this idea even come from? Cartoons are negotiable, though…"

Soon enough, Effie found herself on the sofa with two soft bodies pressed against her, hugging the kids gently as they watched a colorful cartoon with enthralled expressions.

"Look, look! It's Tali!"

"Go get them, Tali!"

On the screen, a pair of precocious kids somehow got themselves into trouble with a band of clumsy bandits while trying to obtain ice cream from a magical ice cream stand. At the last moment, the owner of the stand — a pink dragon named Tali — revealed herself to save the day.

She dealt with the bandits, huffed and puffed until they ran away to surrender themselves to the police, and then treated the kids to waffle cones full of delicious ice cream.

"Ah, I want ice cream too!"

"Tali is the best!"

The name of this popular cartoon was, apparently, "Talitha's Ice Cream".

The titular Talitha, strangely enough, resembled a young Awakened girl Effie had met in Bastion once or twice — one of the Shadow Clan members operating there in secret. Considering that everyone in Mirage City was based on reflections from outside the Great Mirror, that wasn't too strange…

Effie did not know why that girl's reflection turned out to be a pink dragon, though. That was a mystery.

'Ah. I want ice cream, too…'

She smiled and hugged her kids tighter.

Then, her expression froze.

'What am I doing?'

These children were not hers.

But even if they were…

Tonight, she was going to say goodbye to them.

Forever.

Effie was going to leave and never return. She was going to face the Castellan and challenge it for control of the Palace of Imagination…

If she lost, she would die. Detective Athena of the Mirage City Police Department would die, too, leaving these sweet kids to grow up without a mother.

If she won, Mirage City would very likely cease to exist… and these innocent children would cease to exist with it.

In any case, she would never see them again.

There was suddenly a dull ache in Effie's chest.

She remained motionless for a while, and then let out a quiet sigh.

'They're not... real...'

Soon enough, the cartoon was over. She prepared the pair of children for bed, and then lingered in their room, looking at them quietly.

"Mom, mom! Dad said that you won't have to go to work for a while. Let's go to the zoo tomorrow! Let's go to the park! Let's go to the movies!"

Effie smiled gently.

"That sounds nice."

The boy seemed way too excited to fall asleep any time soon.

"Let's go to the lake! Let's go to the toy store! Ooh… they are opening the castle soon, let's go to the castle!"

Effie's smile dimmed a little.

"That sounds nice, too."

Some time later, she turned off the lamps and put on the night light for the children. Then, Effie made to leave…

But at the last moment, a tiny hand caught her sleeve.

Glancing down, she saw the little girl looking at her with pitiful eyes.

"Mama… don't go…"

Effie let out a small sigh.

Kneeling in front of the girl's bed, she tucked her in and said softly:

"Mama has to go, pumpkin. Sleep tight. When you open your eyes…"

She paused and remained silent for a while. Then, she forced out a smile.

"Daddy will make you a delicious breakfast. He will take you to the zoo, to the park, and to the movies. He will even buy you ice cream."

The girl's eyes glistened.

"What about you, mama? Will Daddy buy ice cream for you, too?"

Effie chuckled.

"Why, of course."

'How can I leave them?'

She looked at the little girl intently, as if wanting to etch her lovely image into her memory.

If someone asked Effie to describe what she felt at that moment, she would not have been able to.

But it was then that she finally understood what she was missing… what stood in her way on the Path of Ascension.

Kai's greatest obstacle had been his lack of confidence. But Effie was different.

What held her back the most was her inability to let go.

The very reason she wanted to become stronger was to protect the things she cherished. But if she wanted to protect them… she had to let go.

She had to learn how to leave them behind.

'How twisted.'

Patting the little girl on the head, Effie leaned down and whispered:

"Mommy loves you very much."

She was saying it for Detective Athena, who could not say it herself… and for her own sake, as well.

…Deep at night, when the entire house slept soundly, Effie crept to the window and opened it without making a sound.

Throwing one last look back, she closed her eyes for a moment and inhaled the smells of the strange, cozy home.

Then, her expression hardened. She smiled bitterly and turned away.

A moment later, she was gone, leaving behind only the scent of rain.

Chapter-2528: Last Fragments

It was at the crack of dawn that Sunny finally reached the abandoned church. The city was still enveloped in deep darkness, though, due to the heavy storm clouds obscuring the sky. The torrential rain continued to pour down. The flooding in various parts of the city was only growing worse — the roads were a mess, and the silence of the dying night was kept at bay by the blaring of the car horns.

Looking at the countless PTVs stuck in the slowly rising water, Sunny could not help but expect them to start blowing up in a devastating chain reaction.

However, none of them did. Despite the strange nature of their engines and fuel, the ancient vehicles were not at all as prone to exploding as he had expected.

Parking his newly acquired PTV in front of the church, Sunny climbed out and walked in. Effie arrived first, it seemed — both of them had long escaped the surveillance team sent to spy on them, but Sunny ran a few errands before returning to their temporary lair.

"Hey, partner."

Effie met him with a wave. Her usually bright and boisterous smile seemed faint and subdued today, and there was a hint of wistful melancholy in her eyes...

Sunny frowned slightly and stopped near her.

"Are you alright?"

Effie chuckled.

"Me? Oh… well, yes. Sure I am. When have I ever not been alright?"

He studied her for a few moments, knowing that she was not telling the truth.

But he also knew that she did not want to talk about what was bothering her.

…At least not with him, who was still mostly a stranger.

So, Sunny simply respected her wishes, even if it hurt.

He smiled derisively.

"You're just bummed out because you'll never get the chance to gobble up an entire box of those donut thingies, right?"

Effie's smile widened, turning at least a little bit sincere.

"Damn. You know me so well! I haven't even thought about that..."

He scoffed, then walked past her.

The Other Mordret was napping on one of the benches. Morgan was keeping an eye on him from behind the altar… Saint was sitting apart from everyone, staring into the distance.

Sunny contemplated for a few moments, then walked over to Morgan first. She briefly informed him about what they had learned from the Other Mordret while he explained to her who was behind the attempts on their lives… the knowledge of what Mordret's Flaw actually was rendered Sunny speechless for a while, but eventually, he gave Morgan a slow nod.

Strangely enough, it made sense, for Mordret to be a… a broken mirror of himself, each shard reflecting the visage of the original person from a different angle.

Sunny looked at Morgan, then asked:

"So, this version of your brother… is he really as nice as he seems? Is he actually a sane person?"

She looked in the direction where the Other Mordret slept and

remained silent for a long while. Her usually cold expression seemed …troubled, somehow.

Eventually, Morgan shook her head slightly and sighed.

"He is indeed just what he seems — nice, decent, compassionate. But a sane person? No, he is not sane… in fact, I am not even sure that he can be called a person. If anything, I'd say that he is even more damaged than the one we know."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"More insane than that psychopath? How so?"

Morgan smiled faintly.

"The Mordret from the real world cannot feel regret, which twisted him into the monster we know today. But this one cannot feel other things: anger, resentment, hatred, contempt… and much more. Strangely enough, or maybe quite predictably, that makes him much less of a complete person than the other one is. He is a... a cripple."

She paused for a moment.

"He has no negative feelings toward the one who imprisoned him in this illusion whatsoever, despite all the suffering he endured here. He might feel sad about the death of his driver, who had served his family for decades, but he is incapable of resenting the person who killed him. And if we tell him that the one who wants to kill him is his own uncle… he would not be able to feel hurt by that betrayal, not really. It is as if his soul was neutered."

Morgan shook her head with a wistful expression.

"So… yes, he is nice. He is smart, affectionate, and pleasant. But he is not mentally sound. Not at all. I guess… he is what remains of a person when their very being gets shattered into pieces."

She looked at Sunny and smiled darkly.

"And if you ask me — crazy as it may sound — I would have preferred to be the murderous one instead of a harmless one."

Sunny stared back at her silently.

'What a surprise. So would I.'

A person would probably become a monster if they were not capable of feeling regret, but what would they become if they were incapable of feeling anger? That wasn't something he ever wanted to experience, or could allow himself to lose.

Sunny had gotten this far due to various reasons, but for a long stretch of it all, he had only survived out of spite. If his ability to feel the darker shades of human emotions was taken away from him, he would not have lived for long.

He would not have been able to truly experience the brighter, beautiful feelings humans felt, either.

'It is a bit... sad.'

No matter how sad it was, though, there was a different aspect of Mordret's Flaw to consider...

He glanced quietly at the sleeping CEO of the Valor Group.

According to Morgan, when one fragment of Mordret killed another, the destroyed fragment was absorbed. That was what the Mordret they knew had done to five of his mirror versions.

And the Other Mordret, despite all of it, was indeed harmless.

That presented a potential way to remove the danger Mordret posed without robbing humanity of one of its most fearsome scions.

The Prince of Nothing could not kill his other self, because that last piece of him he had not absorbed yet contained his death…

But what would happen if the Other Mordret killed the Prince of Nothing?

Then, they would become an actual person. A complete individual capable of feeling everything that a human being was supposed to feel, and therefore not at all as unhinged as the Prince of Nothing

was.

And that would give Sunny and Nephis a chance to recruit an ally who was both immensely powerful and potentially reliable. Which was an incredible boon, especially considering the looming threat of Asterion.

'It is worth considering, is it not?'

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

Whether it was or wasn't worth it did not matter. Because it was hardly possible — precisely because of what the Other Mordret was. He was indeed overly nice, kind, and compassionate, which meant that he would never kill his other self, no matter what the Prince of Nothing had done in the past.

One could not kill the other without destroying himself, while the other could not kill anyone, really, let alone his last last mirror sibling. Therefore, Mordret was destined to remain fragmented forever.

'A Flaw is a Flaw... how gruesomely apt.'

Sunny sighed, then looked at Morgan and said in a neutral tone:

"In any case, go wake him up. We should start preparing to depart… so, get ready. Everything will be decided today."

When Morgan walked past him, Sunny inhaled deeply and looked at Saint.

'Now, for the hardest part…'

He had to convince Dr. Saint to lend them a hand in the fight against the Castellan, somehow.

Chapter-2529: Carved in Stone

"Dr. Saint…"

Sunny had to repeat her name twice before she turned and regarded him with a distant, aloof gaze. He hesitated for a few moments, then sat down next to her.

"I guess I have some good news and some bad news for you."

Saint simply watched him without saying anything. He could not read anything from her expression, either — so, despite the fact that she looked quite like a human at the moment, he suddenly felt like he was talking to his familiar Shadow.

That comforted him a little.

"The good news is that I found out who is trying to kill us. The bad news is that arresting him, let alone prosecuting him, will pose a problem. Half of the city is in his pocket, after all. And we don't have time to do it by the book, either."

She raised her eyebrows slightly, prompting Sunny to smile.

"You're right... I do not have the authority to arrest anyone anymore, anyway. But you know what my counterpart, the Devil Detective, would say. We have to try regardless. That person has committed too many crimes to walk free — the victims of the Nihilist and all the other people he hurt or ruined demand justice. Me personally, though? I do not care about justice too much."

He inhaled deeply.

"However, I have my own reasons to want to deal with the mastermind behind all these deaths. Doing so will be my ticket home — and yours, too. Among other things. So, I want to ask a favor from

you. That guy will not go down without a fight. Please, help me bring him down… I need you."

Sunny chuckled.

"Like always. It strikes me that I would not be alive if not for your silent presence over all these years — in fact, I would have died ten times over. Hell, you even taught me how to properly wield a sword… and as a sign of gratitude, I dragged you on a series of increasingly macabre adventures through the depths of increasingly dreadful hells. Sorry, Saint… you got a very troublesome, very needy liege."

He remained silent for a while, looking down, then added:

"In any case, I doubt that we will have a conversation like this after escaping the Palace of Imagination. So, using this chance, I just wanted to say… thank you, Saint. For everything. Even if I somehow managed to find a way to survive without you... it would not have been half as fun."

She studied him for a long while without saying anything, then looked away.

After a long stretch of silence, Saint let out a quiet sigh and asked:

"So, in that supposedly real world… did you mention that I serve you? I am a servant?"

Sunny coughed.

"Well... no? Not exactly. I am the Lord of Shadows, and you are one of my Shadows — the very first Shadow I created, actually. It is the nature of a shadow to be cast by someone, and in your case, I guess you are cast by me. You are not a servant, though. More of… a champion, a companion, and the general of my legion."

He looked at the beautiful windows of the church and smiled.

"We met on the streets of the Dark City, where you killed a couple of abominations of a higher Rank and Class than you, all alone. Then, we traveled across the deadly reaches of the Forgotten Shore

together, besieged the Crimson Spire, explored the Chained Isles and endured the Crushing side by side, survived the madness of the Kingdom of Hope, fought a losing war in Antarctica and defended Falcon Scott until the bitter end, ventured into the dreadful darkness of the Tomb of Ariel and sailed the Great River of Time, crossed the Hollow Mountains and reached the end of the world, fought a bloody war against the Sovereigns on the corpse of a dead god…"

Sunny chuckled.

"Goodness gracious. Now that I list all these things aloud, it sounds like quite an intense decade."

Saint shifted slightly, then raised her hand. A torrent of inky darkness escaped from beneath her skin, swirling around her wrist before forming into a black blade for a moment.

"...I don't recall."

Sunny sighed.

He still did not know why Saint seemed to be incapable of remembering who she was. It was funny, but despite being the Lord of Shadows, he did not know a lot about the nature of his Shadows. He did not really know how they thought, how they felt, what motivated them… what their goals and desires were, or if they even had any.

He had only ever caught small glimpses of how they existed while augmenting them. Sunny knew, for example, that Saint vaguely remembered her original self… however, those memories were distant and obscure, like a half-forgotten dream.

Perhaps that was a mercy.

After all, what would become of Saint if she could remember her previous life? That life contained thousands of years of Corruption, after all. Remembering it would not only be a torment, but could very well drive her insane, or worse still — infect her with the Seeds of Nightmare all over again.

Maybe that was why she could not remember herself here, in Mirage

City.

Or maybe it was because Saint was quite like Mordret… a semblance of a person, but not really a complete being. Even her name was not really a name, but simply what her people had been called. Nameless and cast by a fateless master, how could she remember her true self?

Eurys had once told Sunny that his Shadows could be completed, somehow… but if there was a way, Sunny had not found it yet.

He rubbed his face.

"Still, even if you don't remember…"

"I'll do it."

He froze, then looked at Saint with wide eyes.

"Excuse me?"

She turned to him with the usual impassive expression.

"I'll help you bring down the mastermind, whoever he is. You can count on me. Like always."

Sunny studied her for a bit.

'Just like that?'

Before he knew it, a relieved sigh escaped from his lips.

"Good. That's good. This is great news, actually. Thank you!"

He paused for a few moment, and then asked:

"But may I ask why?"

Saint remained silent for a long while, contemplating. It seemed like she was carefully choosing the right words.

But in the end, she simply smiled.

"I don't know. I must have gone mad."

Sunny stared at her, dumbstruck.

Seeing Saint smile… was truly a stunning sight.

Chapter-2530: Full Experience

Finally, they gathered around the altar. Sunny, Effie, Morgan, Saint… and the Other Mordret, who had woken up from his peaceful nap.

The four of them looked somber and apprehensive, while the CEO of the Valor Group looked carefree and full of curiosity.

"Good morning, Detective Sunless. How was your night?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then sighed.

"Eventful."

He looked at each of his companions in turn, and then spoke calmly:

"As I already mentioned, the culprit behind the Nihilist killings and the attempts on our lives is none other than the chairman of the Valor Group board, Madoc. He perpetrated these crimes in an attempt to cover up his poor handling of the Northern Dam renovation project."

Saying this, Sunny glanced at the Other Mordret.

Just as Morgan had said, he did not look particularly hurt by the fact that his own uncle was trying to kill him. Mordret's expression remained relaxed and unblemished, and the slight smile playing on his lips did not falter.

He did look a little concerned, though.

"Northern damn renovation… that is just bad business. Terrible optics, as well. I simply do not understand what Uncle was thinking."

'Of all the things…'

Morgan had mentioned that the guy was harmless, but she had not

mentioned that he was hopeless.

'At least he's honest.'

Shaking his head, Sunny continued:

"I struck a deal with Mordret… the mean Mordret… to pose as the Valor CEO and draw Madoc out. They agreed to meet face-to-face and talk. Madoc chose the location — it is the Castle. So, that is where we need to go."

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

"It is bound to be a trap… a death trap. You know that the Other playing the role of our uncle will bring an army of henchmen to make sure that Mordret does not walk out of their meeting alive."

Sunny smiled.

"Naturally. It's going to be a real mess — I'm counting on it."

Turning away, he headed to the doors.

"Follow me."

They exited the abandoned church and approached the PTV he had arrived on. While Sunny was trying to remember how to open a trunk, Effie blinked a couple of times.

"Wait, where did you get a car? And this one is much better than yours was, too!"

Sunny scowled, offended on behalf of his destroyed PTV.

"First of all, it's not better. It just looks nicer. And second of all, I paid a visit to our friends from the Black Snake gang after finishing up with Mordret and had a good talk with them."

He smiled.

"Let's just say that those gangsters felt inclined to give me some protection money. And that money came in the form of this vehicle,

as well as what's in its trunk."

The trunk finally opened, and Sunny pointed inside with a proud look.

Effie whistled.

"Wow."

Inside were all the tools one would need to storm the lair of a criminal mastermind. Tactical gear, bulletproof vests, boxes of bullets, guns…

Effie looked at them with a confused expression.

"Where did they even get all this stuff?"

Handing her a bulletproof vest, Sunny pointed to the letters on its front.

"Where else? They bought it from the cops."

It was a funny situation, really. The criminals had purchased illegal equipment from dirty cops, and then he extorted them for said equipment, receiving it as a bribe to leave them alone.

It was like a cycle of corruption.

"In any case, the Castle will most likely be heavily defended. We will sneak inside… if that doesn't work, we will storm it, take out Madoc's henchmen, and then deal with Madoc himself. Once he is rendered useless, the Castellan will be forced to reveal its hand — that is when we will help Effie reach it, destroy it, and reclaim her authority as the Master of the Castle."

Morgan frowned.

"Hold your horses. How are we supposed to take out a small army of private security specialists? They will be armed, as well, and we are currently mundane. One bullet will be all it takes to kill us."

Sunny smiled.

"Madoc might have an army of henchmen… but we have Saint."

He pointed to his taciturn psychiatrist, who was looking at the firearms with an uninterested expression.

"As far as we know, she is the only being in Mirage City capable of wielding Awakened powers. She is far away from reclaiming her Transcendent might, but even then, one of her should be enough to balance the scales."

Saint gave him a sideways glance and did not say anything.

Morgan, meanwhile, looked at the Other Mordret.

"What about him? Where are we going to stash him?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Nowhere in Mirage City is safe. Not only because the Castellan is now hunting him down in an attempt to make your fratricide fantasy come true, but also because the northern dam is compromised. There is no telling when it will collapse, and what the result will be."

He offered the Other Mordret a dark smile.

"So, we'll be taking him with us. Naturally, Mr. Mordret here is not exactly a seasoned fighter…"

Sunny turned to Morgan.

"So, it is going to be your job to keep him safe."

She blinked a couple of times.

"Mine? Why me? Have you forgotten why I…"

She did not say the rest, but he understood. Morgan had come to the Palace of Imagination to kill the Other Mordret, so she was understandably surprised that Sunny was entrusting her brother's safety to her.

But it was the very fact that she seemed reluctant to admit her goal in

front of the Other Mordret that affirmed his decision.

He shrugged.

"Because his survival is paramount, and after Saint, you are the strongest among us due to your Flaw. Plus… you are his sister. He'll be more comfortable with you, and less likely to do something foolish."

Morgan looked at him in displeasure for a while, then scoffed and looked away.

"Don't regret your decision later, Lord Shadow."

Sunny glanced at her and grinned.

"Hey. Don't pout. Isn't it fun? The last time, you were defending the Castle from Mordret… now, you'll be the one besieging it with him. It's like the full experience."

Morgan pierced him with a scathing gaze.

"I. Do not pout."

Her voice sounded cold enough to freeze the falling rain.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Well, in any case, arm yourselves and get into the PTV."

He looked up and inhaled the alien air of Mirage City with a full chest.

What would the Devil Detective say?

Sunny smiled darkly.

"It is time to dish out some justice."

Chapter-2531: Cast Off

The PTV stopped near a private dock hidden from view by a small park. Sunny turned off the engine and looked at his companions, feeling a strange mixture of excitement and fatigue.

Truth be told, he was quite tired. Sunny did not quite remember when he slept the last time, and while this would not have been a problem in usual circumstances, he was a mundane person at the moment. His eyelids were heavy and his head felt like it was cast from lead, but at the same time, he was full of restless, frenetic energy.

'Ah. I miss being a demigod.'

"Let's go."

They exited the vehicle and descended to a wooden pier that extended a small distance into the restless waters of the Mirror Lake. There, a beautiful wooden sailboat waited for them, ready to set sail.

Well, figuratively speaking. The weather was not conducive to raising sails, but the boat was outfitted with an electric motor, as well.

It was the Other Mordret's luxury yacht… or rather, one of his luxurious yachts. Of course.

A tall figure was waiting for them at the edge of the pier, hidden by the curtain of rain. With his long tattered coat, pale face, and emotionless expression, Mordret looked like Charon, the ferryman of the Underworld… the lake stretched behind him, and far in the distance, the magnificent silhouette of the great castle rose from the surging waves like a mirage.

Mordret looked at them silently. His eerie mirror-like eyes lingered for a few moments on his other incarnation, and then the empty cold

void of his true self disappeared behind a pleasant smile.

"Well, this certainly brings back memories. Morgan, dear sister… we really should stop meeting like this."

Still smiling, he glanced back, at the distant walls of the Castle.

"Granted, slowly crushing your spirit in those ruins was quite an amusing pastime. Splendid to see you as well, Saint Athena — you are a sight for sore eyes, as always. It takes a really special person to stay alive after being maimed, mangled, and killed by me so many times… allow me to extend my admiration."

Effie looked at him for a few moments, then smiled.

"Oh? How about I extend my foot all the way up your ass, instead?"

Sunny winced.

Her words were somewhat crude… but she wasn't wrong.

Looking at Mordret darkly, he said:

"Are you sure you want to make us angry at this point? Or do you think that I don't have another Cursed Nightmare Creature stashed somewhere to drop on your deranged head?"

Sunny scoffed.

"In fact, I have five. Two Beasts, two Devils, and a Tyrant. So… mind your manners."

Of course, he was talking about the Cursed Ones imprisoned in the Death Game and the Dreadful Dollhouse. Unleashing them upon the world was not something he would do, of course, but the bastard did not have to know that.

Mordret's smile turned a little forced.

"... Apologies. Please, come aboard — there is no time to waste."

They followed him onto the yacht. Sunny noticed that Morgan's

hands twitched a little when she was walking past Mordret — luckily, she did not pull her black leather gloves off, so it seemed that they would be able to maintain peace at least for now.

The Other Mordret could not pull his eyes away from his mirror copy. There was a faint, foolish smile on his face — as if he had met someone precious after a long separation. Mordret himself, however, did not even look his way, acting like his other part did not even exist.

Standing side by side, they were… utterly the same. The clothes were different, and one was much more ragged than the other, but the similarity between them was so complete that it seemed strange. They looked more alike than identical twins. They were simply flawless copies of each other.

Nevertheless, it was impossible to confuse them.

Or so Sunny thought, until the two shards of Mordret disappeared into the cabin and returned wearing each other's clothes.

The Other Mordret — the pampered CEO of the Valor Group — was now wearing rags under a tattered raincoat. Mordret himself, meanwhile, was wearing a chic viridian suit with tasteful golden accents. He had styled his hair and changed his posture, appearing less imposing and more subdued.

Then, Mordret took a deep breath and plastered a faint, foolish smile on his face. Everything about him suddenly changed, as if he was reborn — his poise, his presence, his gaze…

A few moments later, Sunny was not at all confident in his ability to differentiate between the two Mordrets.

'This… might be a problem.'

Mordret looked at him innocently and coughed.

"So, Detective Sunless, should we cast off?"

Sunny stared at him for a while, then nodded slowly.

"Sure. Let's… do that."

The boat was tied to the pier by a rope. Effie was the one who untied it and then jumped aboard, almost slipping on the wet deck — Sunny helped her regain balance and looked at the hazy silhouette of Mirage City, which was slowly drifting away.

After remaining silent for a few moments, he sighed.

"I feel like we won't be coming ashore after arriving at the Castle. This place… was fun, in its own way. I never thought I'd ever witness how people lived before the Dark Times — before the resource starvation, the wars, the natural disasters, and the Nightmare Spell. In a world of peace, prosperity, and promise."

He hesitated.

"And they still manage to make a mess out of it. Well… I guess that's just human nature. What do you think?"

Effie looked back, too.

She contemplated her answer for a while, and then smiled.

"This place has chocolate milk and donuts. I'm going to miss it."

Sunny sighed.

"And cultivation dramas. Those are great, as well."

Effie chuckled, then unholstered her revolver and opened the drum, sliding the rounds into it one after another.

"You know…"

She loaded the last round and snapped the revolver shut.

"If we defeat the Castellan and regain control of this Component of Bastion, we might be able to fashion the Palace of Imagination into whatever we want."

Effie looked at Sunny and grinned.

"We can even make that cultivation stuff you mentioned come true. Just imagine! You, me, Nephis, Cassie, Kai, and Jet taking a vacation here, building the most awesome of cultivation sects."

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"I'm pretty sure that we'll find a more useful way of controlling the Palace of Imagination."

He remained silent for a while, feeling the boat accelerating beneath them, and then added:

"But if we do build an awesome cultivation sect, it has to be located on a mountain. An awesome mountain covered in cherry blossoms. With caves and deep pools of natural qi…"

The sailboat cut across the lake, coming closer and closer to the towering castle.

The beautiful, ruined heart of Mirage City.

Chapter-2532: Mirage Castle Museum

Just like in True Bastion, the great castle of Mirage City stood atop a mountain that rose from the lake. It was both similar and different — immense, but not nearly as gargantuan as the real one, seemingly built with human hands. The ancient fortress was in a state of disrepair, but there were signs of restoration works here and there, as well as scaffolds and heavy machinery.

There were banners placed along the winding path leading to the great gates, as well:

"Mirage Castle Museum — Grand Opening Soon!"

The level of water in the lake had risen, though, so the lower docks were entirely submerged. So was a long portion of the stone steps, as well as several construction machines that had not been moved higher up the slope of the mountain in time.

There was still quite a way to go from the higher pier, though, and the gates were firmly shut.

Sunny, Effie, and Saint hid behind the cabin of the yacht, while Morgan and the Other Mordret retreated inside. Only the real Mordret remained on the deck, guiding the boat to a pontoon pier.

There was movement on the walls of the castle as it approached, and Sunny noticed human figures keeping watch on the lake — those were Madoc's henchmen, no doubt, each armed with firearms that were supposed to be illegal in Mirage City.

Jumping to the pier and tying the yacht to it, Mordret whistled a carefree melody.

He did, however, say quietly while his back was turned to the Castle:

"What, exactly, am I supposed to accomplish here?"

Sunny answered a few moments later, his voice barely audible through the rustling of rain:

"Get Madoc to come meet you personally. If that does not work, at least make them open the gates. We'll take it from there."

Mordret smiled.

"What will stop them from shooting me dead as soon as I show my face?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I don't know. Figure something out… if you do get shot in the face, though, they'll have to open the gate to retrieve your body. So that works, too."

Mordret sighed.

"You know, Sunless. You are not a very nice person, are you?"

Sunny smiled nicely.

"Hey, at least I am a person."

Finishing up with the knot, Mordret opened an expensive umbrella and walked up the stone steps. In less than a minute, powerful spotlights turned to illuminate his tall figure, and he raised a hand to shield his eyes from the light.

Sunny shifted slightly and said evenly, addressing Effie and Saint:

"Get ready."

Out there in front of them, a small distance up the slope, Mordret lowered the umbrella to reveal his face. He had donned the mask of his nicer twin again, so his expression was calm and good-natured.

"Uncle? Are you there?"

The people on the wall were all looking at him, holding guns in their hands. Then, there was more movement, and a new figure revealed itself above the gates.

'How odd.'

Sunny had not seen Madoc since his death in the Battle of the Black Skull. Everything had happened so suddenly back then, and even Whispering Blade, one of the greatest champions of the Sword Domain, fell victim to the Great horrors escaping the towering Nightmare Gates in the mayhem.

The Sword Domain itself was gone now… so it was strange to see Madoc alive and well, even knowing that he was merely a reflection of the real Whispering Blade.

Standing above the gates of the Castle, wearing a fashionable business suit and a black coat, Madoc looked down at Mordret coldly. His tie was held in place by a silver pin, and there was a black umbrella protecting him from the rain — he was not holding it himself, though. Instead, a servile minion was doing it for him.

With his harsh features and a heavy gaze, Madoc looked the part… he was undeniably the villain of this story.

'Poor Whispering Blade.'

The real man had never betrayed his brother or his niece. But his reflection was as corrupt and treacherous as they came.

"Dear nephew… you are as gullible as ever. I've warned you many times to fix that naive personality of yours, haven't I? Although I guess it is too late now."

He had to raise his voice to be heard, but even then, Sunny only caught bits and pieces of what Madoc said in his commanding, authoritative voice.

He did hear what Mordret said in response, though:

"Oh… I am terribly sorry, Uncle. I can't quite make out what you are saying. Why don't you come down so that we can discuss the issues

having to do with Valor Construction properly?"

Madoc sighed.

"The fact that you think that talking can resolve anything, at this point, just proves what I knew all along — that you are not fit to head the Valor Group. Don't blame me, nephew. You brought this on yourself."

Turning his head, he said something quietly to his people, and one of them raised his gun.

Mordret flinched.

"Wait, wait!"

When Madoc looked back, he smiled.

"Are you sure you want to shoot me, Uncle? A bullet wound is not easy to cover up. Surely, drowning me in the lake would make things much easier for you… when they fish my body out of the water, the coroner will just conclude that I had an unfortunate boating accident."

His logic was hard to deny… and it meant that Madoc's people would have to come down the wall and open the gate to capture him.

'Good, good…'

However, Madoc simply smiled darkly.

"Who says that there will be a body to find? What a fool you are. Goodbye, nephew. Kill him!"

Mordret's eyes widened.

In the next moment, there was a deafening sound of a gunshot…

And the henchmen aiming at Mordret plummeted from the wall, leaving a trail of blood behind.

"Goddammit!"

Sunny found himself pressing his hands against his ringing ears. Beside him, Effie lowered her revolver with a satisfied expression.

"Wow. I was aiming for Madoc, but this works, too!"

It was indeed a good shot.

But it had been so damn loud!

"What are you waiting for? Move!"

Up on the wall, Madoc had already disappeared from view. Mordret dove into the bushes beside the stone path. The henchmen were already opening fire on the yacht.

Sunny gritted his teeth…

And started moving.

Chapter-2533: Firefight

Splinters of wood exploded into the air as bullets hit the yacht. Sunny bent low and peeked from behind the cabin, raising his arm to take aim. The figures of Madoc's henchmen on the tall wall of the castle were barely visible behind the curtain of rain — the distance was substantial, as well, and they were in an elevated position to boot.

Still, he was the Lord of Shadows. Someone who could hit a target with a javelin made of pure darkness from dozens of kilometers away.

Surely, a trifling revolver…

Bang!

'O—oh!'

His bullet did hit someone — however, Sunny failed to make the next shot and dove back behind cover, cursing under his breath.

The mechanism of the archaic firearm was exceedingly simple, and the double-action trigger was easy to pull without making the barrel wobble. However, the strange thing kicked like a mule! Sunny had never fired a gun before, let alone one from a distant past, so he did not expect the recoil to be so severe.

Bang, bang, bang!

Effie held her own gun firmly with both hands, crouching low. She seemed to have hit someone, as well, then hurriedly reeled to the side. A moment later, the roof of the cabin near her head exploded into splinters, making her wince.

"Damn… there's really an army of them out there."

Sunny smiled crookedly as he wiped the drops of rain from his face.

"We have a secret weapon, though. We just need to get a little closer to deploy it."

He glanced at Saint, who was pressing herself into the wall of the cabin near him with a deceptively indifferent expression on her exquisitely beautiful face. She was plugging her ears, though, seemingly unhappy due to the deafening noise of the firefight.

At that moment, there was a bright flash, and a deafening thunderclap tore apart the sky. A blinding bolt of lightning connected the tallest tower of the castle to the dark veil of storm clouds ahead, and arcs of electricity danced on its spire for a few moments.

"Cover me!"

Sunny leaned sideways and raised his revolver again. This time, he had learned his lesson and compensated for the recoil, firing the gun four times in rapid succession. The first two bullets hit the parapet of the battlements, but the third and the fourth found their mark, hitting a vague figure of a henchman in the chest and the shoulder.

Sunny wanted to capitalize on his success by dashing to the bow of the yacht, but in the next moment, a deluge of bullets descended upon his position, forcing him to dive back into the cover.

"Hey! I told you to cover me!"

Effie wiped a bit of blood from a cut left on her cheek by a stray splitter and shrugged.

"What could I do? They started shooting the moment a tip of my ear showed from behind the cabin. And they know how to shoot, too!"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Damnation."

Showered both by the torrential rain and by the splinters flying off the yacht, he crouched, pulled on a special lever, and opened the drum of his revolver. Sunny shook it a little, expecting the spent

cartridges to fall out, but only one did. It rolled directly onto his thigh.

"Ah, damn! Hot, hot!"

Sending the scalding cartridge flying with a hurried swipe, he huffed in annoyance and pushed on the ejection rod. The remaining shells — as well as one unused round — scattered on the deck, and Sunny pulled six more out of his pocket.

Sliding them into the drum one after another, he grimaced.

"Seems like we are pinned down here pretty badly."

Effie was reloading her gun, as well.

"Yeah."

Sunny flinched when a bullet ricocheted from a mast and zipped past his head.

"And the gate is still closed."

Effie snapped the drum of her revolver shut and looked at him.

"True."

Sunny frowned.

"And this boat is going to sink from all the holes those bastards are making in it before we make it to the shore."

Effie made a face.

"Sounds about right."

He sighed.

"I don't know about you… but I hate being thrown into water. It happens to me way too often. No, really — I've been thrown into water a weird amount of times. And I hated every single one."

Effie smiled.

"So, partner, what are we going to do about it?"

Sunny grinned.

"Easy. Don't shoot the henchmen… shoot the spotlights."

He prepared to follow his own advice.

"I'll take the ones on the right, you take the ones on the left. Ready? One, two, light them up!"

They dove out of cover at the same time, aiming their guns swiftly. Their shots rang almost simultaneously, and two of the spotlights installed on the wall of the castle exploded into a rain of glass shards and sparks.

A moment later, two more were destroyed, plunging the approach to the castle into a dim darkness.

"This should be enough…"

Looking at the bottom of the wall, Sunny smiled darkly.

"I guess he is still alive, after all."

Out there, under the guise of darkness, a figure in a stylish suit dashed from behind an abandoned construction machine toward the wall. As Sunny and Effie fired a few more shots in the direction of the henchmen, Mordret reached the ancient stones of the castle wall unseen and grabbed onto them, climbing with surprising agility.

It looked both eerie and almost impossible, for a human to scale a wet, vertical wall with such ease. Nevertheless, in less than a minute, completely unnoticed, Mordret reached the battlements and slid over the parapet without making a sound.

"Get ready to move."

A few moments later, there was a lull in the rain of bullets pelting the yacht. Sunny dashed forward, followed by Effie and Saint.

They could not see what was happening on the battlements above the

gate from the stone steps, but could hear screams and sporadic gunshots. A body fell down, splattering on the stone plates and growing motionless.

The henchmen further down the length of the wall were still aiming at them, though. Just a few seconds after Sunny, Effie, and Saint jumped ashore, the first bullet whistled past them.

"Faster!"

They made a mad dash up the steps, eventually finding cover behind a massive construction machine just a few dozen meters away from the gate.

By then, the henchmen had concentrated fire on them once again, making it almost impossible to move.

But it did not matter anymore.

Catching his breath, Sunny calmly reloaded his gun and looked at Saint.

A dark smile appeared on his face.

"Dr. Saint, if you will… it's time for your entrance."

Chapter-2534: Enter Saint

With the spotlights gone, Mordret had been able to scale the wall and attack the mercenaries hired by Madoc on the battlements. That, in turn, allowed Sunny, Effie, and Saint to advance up the slope and get close to the towering wooden gates of the Castle.

Sunny believed that Saint was the most powerful being in Mirage City at the moment. However, that did not make her immortal — according to his observations, she was currently at the level of power that Awakened possessed… and Awakened were still vulnerable to conventional weapons like guns.

It was harder to kill them with bullets than mundane people, but not impossible.

So, he could not in good conscience command Saint to storm the gates from the pier. Now, however…

All that separated them from the gates was a few dozen meters of open ground. A deadly expanse for him and Effie, but not for Saint.

Hearing his words, she took a deep breath and then nodded slowly.

The bullets were hitting the construction machine they were hiding behind with loud metallic ringing. Making sure not to expose himself to a lucky shot, Sunny moved slightly, letting Saint get to the edge of the massive tracks. Effie looked at her nervously, but did not say anything.

Saint crouched low, supporting herself with one hand, and then looked in the direction of the gates.

Sunny was suddenly nervous, too.

Forcing out a smile, he asked in a tense tone:

"Any last words?"

Of course, Saint did not answer.

Instead, she pushed herself off the ground, leaving the cover and shooting toward the gates of the castle with stunning speed. The bullets trailed behind her, sending small fountains of water shooting into the air from the puddles on the ground. The henchmen scurried, trying to hit the swift target…

But their reaction was not fast enough.

Saint breached the distance between the construction machine and the gates in a split second. Sunny expected her to scale the wall in a few swift leaps and descend upon the mercenaries in a cold, silent fury…

But his wayward Shadow had her own plans.

Instead of trying to climb onto the battlefields… she simply lowered her shoulder and crashed into the great gates of the ancient castle like a siege ram.

The ground shook, and the walls of the castle shuddered. A cloud of splinters shot in all directions like shrapnel, and the massive wooden gate collapsed, shattered by the force of the impact.

Saint disappeared into the haze, and Sunny just stared at the devastation caused by his quiet, elegant psychiatrist in shock.

"Well… that's one way to do it."

A moment later, there was a thunderous roar of countless guns firing coming from the courtyard of the castle. The mercenaries had no time to worry about the stone steps anymore.

"Morgan! It's clear!"

Morgan and the Other Mordret appeared from the curtain of rain just a few seconds later. Letting go of the sleeve of his tattered cloak, she evaluated the situation for a moment, then looked down and calmly pulled off her gloves.

"Are we going in?"

Sunny checked to see how many bullets he had left, and nodded.

"Of course."

The Other Mordret looked between them for a moment, then coughed.

"I am sorry, Detective Sunless… but is it wise? There seems to be a lot of guns firing inside."

Sunny glanced at him, then shrugged.

"Well... no one has ever accused me of being wise."

With that, he grinned.

"Plus, we can't miss all the fun, can we?"

Standing by his side, Effie nodded.

"You might be out of the loop, Mr. Mordret, but we three are not just some random people out there, in the real world. Shadow Boy, Morgan, and me… that's like half of the scariest people in the world. And two stunning beauties."

Sunny gave her a sideways glance.

"Do I not count as a stunning beauty?"

Effie scoffed.

He remained silent for a moment, preparing himself for the dash into the courtyard, and smiled.

"Strange. I distinctly remember you describing Master Sunless as, what was it…"

"Let's go!"

Diving from behind the construction machine, Effie lunged forward. Sunny suppressed a laugh and followed, feeling the rain pelting him

in the face and hearing the guns thundering ahead.

They reached the gateway in a few seconds and hid in its shadow, studying what was happening inside.

If Sunny had to describe it in one word… it would be carnage.

Just then, another lightning bolt struck, illuminating the world. In that stark light, he saw Saint advancing in an unpredictable pattern across the vast courtyard, moving with such speed that her figure seemed like a blur. She was pursuing the retreating mercenaries, cutting them down one after another with her swirling black blade.

The battlements to their right were a chaotic mess of screams and gunshots. Sunny could not see what was happening there, only the streams of blood flowing down the wall.

The battlements to their left, however, were a source of danger. The henchmen manning them were alive and well, unleashing a storm of bullets in Saint's direction.

It was hard to imagine that they could track her movements so precisely despite her speed and the heavy rain… if not for one crucial detail.

As Saint moved, killing one mercenary after another, whisps of white fog followed her like a ghostly mantle. By now, a furious whirlwind of mist was surrounding her, and missing it was all but impossible.

Saint… seemed to be growing faster, stronger, and more steadfast with each second.

But just as Sunny evaluated the situation, a stray bullet hit her in the chest, throwing her petite body back. The bulletproof vest did its job, but her rhythm was broken, and she became exposed for a few crucial moments.

"Left wall!"

Raising his revolver, Sunny opened fire. Effie did the same, while Morgan coldly discharged her weapon into the back of a straggler mercenary who had gotten too close to them, and then turned around

to run.

"Move."

Covering Saint, they rushed left, toward the stairs leading to the battlements, and scaled them.

Morgan held the Other Mordret back at the top of the stairs while Effie and Sunny prepared to dive onto the wall and clash with the mercenaries defending it.

Looking at Effie, Sunny grinned.

"Hey."

She gripped her revolver tighter.

"What?"

Sunny inhaled deeply, and then said in an even tone:

"Don't get shot."

They moved in unison, throwing open the door of the guard tower and gaining a clear shot of the battlements.

The mercenaries were caught by surprise, so Sunny and Effie brought half a dozen down before the rest could react. The muzzle flashes and the thunderclaps of their shots were both blinding and deafening, making the sight of people being shot dead a little less gruesome.

Their advantage did not last long, though. And when it disappeared...

'Ah… me and my goddamn tongue…"

Sunny immediately got shot.

Chapter-2535: Gotta Knock a Little Harder

After wielding a gun for the first time in his life…

Sunny was highly amused.

'Wow. What a refined and lofty experience!'

He had already shot half a dozen enemies dead, and he wasn't even out of breath. All he needed to do in order to kill someone was point the gun in their general direction and pull the trigger. Sure, there was a lot of noise, some recoil, and he had to run around and crouch from time to time, but overall, Sunny had not broken a sweat yet.

It was in such stark contrast with how he usually fought battles. Out there in the real world, Awakened almost always engaged their enemies in melee — it was an intense, demanding process that put a dire strain on the entire body. Every blow reverberated in their very bones, and every clash left them feeling bruised and battered even if they had not sustained any injuries.

It was utterly exhausting.

Even ranged weapons such as bows, slings, and javelins required one to exert themselves until their muscles were on the verge of tearing.

Compared to that, using a gun was like a leisurely walk in the park. So, Sunny was slowly developing a very positive opinion of this quaint weapon…

That was until he got shot in the chest, of course.

"O—oof!"

Before Sunny knew it, he was thrown back. The air had been pushed out of his lungs, and his entire body went numb for a few moments. The pain of the impact had not arrived yet, but he could already tell how much it was going to hurt all too soon. The bulletproof vest seemed to have caught the bullet, and yet…

Sunny felt like he was back in Antarctica, being kicked by Goliath all over again.

'Damn it!'

He staggered back into the guard tower and almost rolled down the stairs — he would have, if not for the fact that Morgan caught him calmly by the collar. Her fingers sliced through the fabric of his jacket and left shallow cuts on his skin, but it was better than breaking his neck on the stone steps.

The Other Mordret hurriedly pulled Sunny back to the landing.

"Detective Sunless! Are you alright?"

Sunny gave him a pained look and finally managed to push some air into his lungs.

His entire chest felt like one big bruise, and his ribs were pulsing with pain.

He missed Bone Weave.

"Alright... is a strong word. I'm some right."

'I hate guns!'

Looking at his own revolver in utter disgust, Sunny suppressed a pained groan.

What a barbaric, vulgar weapon it was. Truly something that only shameless people would use — talentless hacks who lacked taste and discernment, let alone the training and dedication needed to wield more deserving weapons.

Cursing under his breath, Sunny leaned into the doorframe of the

guard tower, hurriedly discharged his remaining rounds into one of the mercenaries, and ducked back.

Effie retreated into the protection of the tower at the same time, breathing heavily as she pressed herself into the cold stones.

A rain of bullets struck the opposite wall a split second later, showering them in stone dust.

"There's… really a lot of them there."

Sunny cursed again while reloading his gun.

They tried to open fire once more, but had to retreat behind cover almost instantly. The narrow entrance to the battlements was a natural bottleneck that made for a deadly firing range — with how many henchmen there were on the castle wall, advancing further seemed like an impossible task.

There was a silver lining to their difficult situation, though. As long as the mercenaries were concentrating their fire on Sunny and Effie, they were not shooting Saint.

"I think we need a plan."

Effie looked at him, then at the doorframe of the guard tower.

Then, she holstered her revolver and grinned.

"One plan, coming right up!"

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What are you…"

Before he could finish the sentence, Effie left her cover and stepped into the open. A bullet grazed her forearm, but she ignored it and grabbed the handle of the door they had thrown open a little earlier, then slammed it shut.

Then, still holding the handle, Effie took half a step back…

And slammed her shoulder into the heavy wooden door, taking it clean off its hinges.

As Sunny's eyes widened, both Effie and the door continued moving, flying into the open — before the door fell, however, Effie grabbed its side with her other hand and held its massive weight in front of her.

It was as if she was holding an oversized tower shield, using it to repel the barrage of bullets.

"...doing, you lunatic?!"

Using the momentum to propel herself, Effie dashed forward. He could see her muscles straining to bear the weight of the heavy wooden door, but even though it was being pummeled by a barrage of bullets, Effie did not drop it.

Neither did she slow down.

A few seconds later, Effie crashed into the mercenaries like a bowling ball, sending several of them flying off the tall wall into the courtyard. A few more were either thrown to the ground or incapacitated, with too many broken bones between them all to count.

Finally losing balance, Effie dropped the door and fell down, as well. Devoid of her improvised tower shield and sprawled on top of it, she was a perfect target for the remaining mercenaries…

However, none of Madoc's henchmen received a chance to shoot her while she was down.

Because Sunny had not been just watching Effie's mad dash with an open mouth. Almost immediately after she dashed out of the guard tower, he followed.

Now, jumping over her, he found himself standing between the remaining mercenaries.

They were in the process of raising their guns to aim at him, but to Sunny, it seemed like they were moving in slow motion.

He grinned.

'Let me impart some culture to you, savages.'

Pulling his knife out of a hidden sheath on the small of his back, he held it in his left hand while the revolver was in his right.

Then, Sunny raised his gun and shot the first of the mercenaries in the face.

'Let me teach you the real meaning of savagery, as well...'

Chapter-2536: Savage Future

Dodging a bullet was impossible… well, for a mundane human, at least.

However, dodging a gunshot was not that hard.

After all, the shooter had to raise their arm, take aim, and squeeze the trigger. The hammer had to strike, and the gunpowder had to explode, propelling the bullet forward. All of that took time.

At long distance, there was still little one could do to avoid being shot despite having ample time to react. Things were different in close quarters, though, especially if a fighter was well-trained.

And there was hardly a more trained fighter than Sunny in all of Mirage City.

Even lacking the ability to sense shadows and use Shadow Dance, he still possessed a profound knowledge of countless battle styles and a keen understanding of the fundamental laws of combat — not to mention a morbidly rich battle experience.

So, now that Sunny was among the mercenaries, they were already doomed.

…He shot the first one in the face, then moved to escape the line of fire of the second one. A deafening gunshot rang out, but the bullet whistled past him.

A moment later, Sunny kicked a henchman in the chest, sending him plummeting off the battlement. Taking a swift step forward, he used the mercenary whose bullet he had dodged to shield himself from the guns of two more — they lingered for a split second, hesitant to shoot their own comrade, and he used that split second to plunge his knife into his neck.

By then, someone else was already aiming at him. Pushing the body of the mercenary at his two friends to slow them down a little, Sunny leaned back to avoid another bullet, then leaped forward.

His knife hissed, slicing the shooter's wrist and forcing the henchman to drop his gun. At the same time, Sunny's revolver barked twice, and the backs of the heads of the two mercenaries who were staggering because of the thrown body exploded into a bloody haze.

'Let's dance…'

Sunny grinned wickedly.

Wielding a gun and a knife, he tore through the remaining mercenaries like a grim reaper. The battlements were relatively narrow, and their numbers were of little use when the enemy was that close — on the contrary, they were a hindrance, since those closer to him prevented those further behind from firing.

The mercenaries were better equipped and far better trained than the members of the Black Snake gang, but they were just as powerless to stop his swift and cold-blooded advance.

Blood spilled on the cold stones, mixing with rainwater. Effie joined him halfway into the slaughter, while Morgan covered them both with several well-placed shots from the safety of the guard tower.

By the time Sunny discharged his sixth and last round, there was a pile of bleeding bodies on the battlements, as well as under the wall in the courtyard below. The remaining henchmen fled, retreating into the main keep.

Making sure that nobody was moving, Sunny exhaled slowly and leaned on the parapet to try to catch his breath. This one skirmish seemed to drain him considerably.

'I have mundane stamina now… ah, what a pitiful existence…'

All he had done in the past few days was avoid sleep altogether, throw an assassin out of a window, fight Mordret, kill a few thugs targeting Saint, survive a car crash, fight some more thugs, do a bit of investigating, storm an ancient castle under a deluge of bullets, get

shot, and dispatch a dozen mercenaries in hand-to-hand combat.

And just because of these few measly things, he was already tired.

'How embarrassing!'

Sunny was suddenly glad that he had only started dating Nephis after becoming a Saint.

Morgan and the Other Mordret caught up with them while he was trying to recover. The latter looked around the scene of carnage with wide eyes and then turned to him with a bright smile.

"Goodness! Detective, you…"

Just then, something boomed thunderously down in the courtyard, and the entire castle shook. A pillar of fire rose above the walls for a moment and then collapsed, suffocated by the rain.

Ignoring the dull pain in his chest, Sunny took a few steps to the edge of the battlements and peered down.

Mordret seemed to have dealt with Madoc's henchmen on the other side of the wall and was nowhere to be seen — all that remained in his wake was a trail of bodies. The mercenaries in the courtyard itself had retreated into the main keep… but not before detonating some kind of explosives, it seemed. Or maybe it was just one of the construction machines that had exploded when a stray bullet hit its fuel tank.

Out there below them, Saint slowly rose from the fire, just as aloof as always. Black smoke and white mist spun around her like a furious whirlwind, making her onyx-black hair flutter wildly in the wind. Her eyes seemed to glow red as they reflected the dancing flames.

'She's alright.'

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

Saint turned and looked up, staring directly at him as she absorbed the white mist. Raising a hand, Sunny pointed to the magnificent keep of the Castle and shouted:

"Keep! Let's rendezvous in the main keep!"

She looked at him for a few moments, then nodded silently and headed toward the heart of the ancient castle with steady steps.

Sunny turned to his companions and pointed to where an aerial bridge connected the battlements to the towering keep.

"We should hurry, too."

Sheathing his knife, he searched his pocket and pulled out a bullet — his last bullet, it seemed.

Sunny sighed.

"I'm out."

He looked at Effie, who shrugged.

"Me too. Oh… and I dropped my gun when I was hauling that door. It's somewhere in the courtyard."

Morgan simply shrugged.

"I'm on my last drum. Couldn't you have shaken off those gangsters for more ammunition?"

Sunny coughed, then winced when that caused a flash of pain to radiate from his bruised ribs.

"Hey, it's not an armory, okay? I took everything they had."

Loading the last round into his revolver, he gripped it and looked ahead, at the great keep of Mirage Castle.

Madoc was somewhere in there… and something was telling him that the Castellan was there, as well.

Sunny holstered the revolver and unsheathed his knife.

"Let's go. We have a criminal mastermind to catch."

Chapter-2537: Bullet Time

Despite the losses Madoc's private security forces had suffered, there was still a small army of mercenaries left in the Castle. It did not matter much that the outer wall had been breached — the main keep itself was designed with defense in mind, so carving a path to Madoc was not going to be easy.

Especially with how low Sunny and his companions were running on bullets.

'See? One more reason why a sword is a superior weapon — the only thing you can run out of when using a sword is enemies to kill…'

If one was Awakened, of course.

Sadly, Sunny wasn't Awakened at the moment.

Even if someone presented him with a sword right now, he would not be too happy. After all, even he was not crazy enough to bring a sword to a gunfight.

So, he was a little troubled.

They made a move to rush toward the main keep, but at that moment, a polite cough interrupted them.

The Other Mordret seemed to linger behind, failing to follow them.

Sunny looked at him with a frown.

"What are you doing? There's no time to waste."

Mordret looked between him, Effie, and Morgan with an awkward expression, then opened his mouth hesitantly.

"I am terribly sorry, and I don't mean to presume. But I could not

help but wonder…"

He pointed down.

"Why don't you just take their guns?"

Sunny blinked a few times.

'What is he…'

Then, he blinked a few more times and looked down with an unreadable expression.

The battlements were covered in bloody puddles and dead mercenaries. Each of those mercenaries… had wielded a gun.

Those guns were now littering the scene of carnage, soaking in the rain.

Why had they not thought of picking them up, indeed?

Sunny suppressed the desire to palm his face.

'It's the lack of sleep…'

Morgan answered for him:

"It's because we're Awakened."

Sunny glanced at her with surprise. Noticing his expression, she shrugged.

"Everyone has subconscious biases. For Awakened, weapons are synonymous with Memories — and Memories disappear when their master dies. So, no one would think to pick up a slain enemy's weapon. This behavioral pattern is so ingrained in us that we don't usually entertain such thoughts… the situation might have changed, but our biases remain the same."

Sunny studied her with a dubious expression for a few moments.

"You're just saying a lot of big words to hide the fact that you are embarrassed too, aren't you?"

Not expecting a response, he turned to the Other Mordret.

"To answer your question, it's because this one is in the habit of using wooden doors as weapons, this one is still coming off an entire cocktail of powerful tranquilizers… and I hate guns."

He looked down.

"Ah, but even though I detest them, I guess I'll make an exception just this once."

With that, he leaned down and picked up a pistol… then stared at it in confusion.

'Huh.'

Sunny looked at Effie and Morgan sheepishly.

"Uh… this one doesn't have a drum? Or a hammer. How do I load it, and how does it fire?"

Morgan closed her eyes for a moment, then leaned down to pick up a gun of her own. She also searched the nearest few bodies and retrieved a few thin rectangular pieces of metal from them.

"These are semi-automatic pistols, not revolvers — the mechanism is a bit different, but the end result is the same. And these are magazines. You load them into the handle, like this."

Sunny stared.

"How do you know all this?"

Morgan looked at him with a strange expression.

"Because traditional firearms are still widely used in the modern day? These are still standard issue for most mundane soldiers and law enforcement officers. Even elite units equipped with magnetic mass drivers like the Gauss rifle still keep a semi-automatic pistol as sidearms, due to how reliable they are. The design is almost entirely the same, too… gunpowder still rules mundane battlefields."

Sunny looked at the pistol in his hand silently.

'Wait…'

So these "primitive, archaic weapons"… weren't archaic at all? They were still being used in the real world?

Suddenly, he felt like a complete fool.

'No, how was I supposed to know? It wasn't like I was assigned to a regular unit in the Evacuation Army. And the thugs in the outskirts never used this type of gun, either!'

"Let's… get some magazines, then."

They were already lagging behind Mordret and Saint. So, they needed to hurry.

They rushed across the outer wall and entered the aerial bridge connecting it to the main keep. The bridge had been raised by the workers renovating the Castle and was quite treacherous, especially in the pouring rain — nevertheless, they reached the door leading into the keep safely.

Any pretense of safety went out of the window the moment they entered it, however.

Knowing that a squall of bullets would meet them inside, Sunny broke into a run and dove into the open door at full speed. He opened fire while still flying through the air — time seemed to slow down as he saw half a dozen henchmen hiding overturned tables, aimed his gun as best he could, and pulled the trigger.

Bullets tore through the air, missing him by mere centimeters. At the same time, display cases behind the mercenaries exploded into glass shards as his own bullets struck the wall.

Sunny landed in a roll and dashed toward a pile of construction materials, sliding behind it while shooting several more times. This time, his aim was much better — one of the mercenaries let out a pained scream and fell to the floor, clutching his shoulder.

More importantly, Sunny's explosive entrance gave Effie and Morgan an opportunity to open fire at the distracted enemies from the doorframe.

The ambush at the entrance hall was annihilated in a matter of seconds.

But…

There were many halls in the great castle, and many narrow corridors. If they had to fight their way though each one, someone was going to be hit by a stray bullet sooner or later.

There was a muffled roar from somewhere down below, and the entire fortress shook. Saint was still pursuing the retreating mercenaries, it seemed.

Sliding a new magazine into her scavenged pistol, Effie gave Sunny a questioning look.

"Where to now?"

He looked at the next door darkly.

"To the throne room."

Chapter-2538: Castle Assault

The path to the throne room was guarded by a swarm of mercenaries, who had hastily prepared for the assault. The corridors and halls of the great castle were full of construction materials and furnishings stored there in preparation for the grand exhibition — all of it was used to build makeshift barricades and gun nests. The halls had become miniature arenas.

'This is… a bit exhilarating.'

Hiding behind a large crate while bullets whistled past him, Sunny felt a dark sense of thrill. Their assault was a singularly deadly affair, since one stray bullet could be the end of them. Death soared on invisible wings, too fast to be seen, and too numerous to be evaded.

Every second could be their last, and all they could do was try their best and hope that luck would be on their side. Mundane humans were just that vulnerable and powerless in the face of firearms…

But that was nothing new. Sunny had spent all of his adult life as an Awakened, and while Awakened were many times stronger and more resilient than mundane people, they lived every day of their violent lives with this exact feeling.

In the world of the Nightmare Spell, it rarely mattered how powerful you were — there were always beings who could erase you from existence with the mere fact of their presence, so in that sense, being vulnerable and helpless in the face of conventional guns was simply more of the same.

At least he had a bulletproof vest, this time.

"Move!"

There was a lull in the barrage of bullets peppering his cover, which

meant that the mercenaries targeting him were reloading. Using this chance, Sunny dove out of his cover and sprinted forward.

He shot his pistol a few times as he ran, forcing his enemies to duck down, and then jumped over their makeshift barricade.

A dozen seconds later, they were dead.

Effie had cleared the second barricade by then, and Morgan calmly shot a lone henchman who had hidden himself on a tall scaffold and tried to pick them off from under the ceiling.

As his body fell down, the Other Mordret tentatively raised his head and emerged from behind a tall vertical crate.

Looking around, he let out a wistful sigh.

"What a travesty… the statues…"

The crates the mercenaries had shot at contained priceless statues that were supposed to become the centerpiece of the exhibition in this hall. Now, the statues were destroyed — even if they had not been shattered completely, they were at least damaged too severely to be displayed.

Sunny gave the Other Mordret a quiet look.

He wanted to say that there was no point in worrying about the statues, but remained silent.

Of course, there wasn't… the grand opening of the Mirage Museum the Valor Group had been preparing would never happen. Worrying about the destruction of the statues was meaningless, as well — soon enough, the entire Mirage City would follow. This illusory reality was coming undone, one way or another.

But even though Sunny knew that the Other Mordret was acting foolish by regretting the damage done to the statues, he did not express his feelings aloud. The man knew how misguided his regret was better than anyone… his entire world was ending, and his entire life was being erased. Sunny was in a unique position to appreciate how terrible such a fate was.

The fact that the Other Mordret still seemed composed and even somewhat calm despite that — instead of breaking down or flying into uncontrollable rage — was another proof of how broken and incomplete he was. Despite how different the two sides of the Prince of Nothing were, neither of them could be called whole.

"Hurry up!"

They rushed out of the statue hall and faced another firefight in the corridor beyond. The darkness was torn apart by the muzzle flashes, and the deafening sound of gunshots reflected from the stone walls, growing almost unbearable.

After the corridor, there was another hall, and after the hall, there was a deadly clash in a narrow stairwell. Sunny and his companions used the scavenged guns to push the enemy back — other times, they had to resort to hand-to-hand combat and deal with the mercenaries in a more visceral manner.

But no matter what kind of obstacle they met around the corner, nothing could stop them. They tore through the defense of Madoc's private security forces without ever losing momentum, leaving a trail of carnage and dead bodies in their wake.

It was no surprise.

Out here in Mirage Castle, met with the fierce resistance of elite forces hired by Madoc, Sunny could fully appreciate just how fearsome his contemporaries were.

Mirage City… was a reflection of a place that had existed in an era of peace. Sunny's own time, however, was an era of strife and war.

Everyone received combat training from early childhood, regardless of gender or social status. There was no distinct martial culture in the real world — martial culture was simply culture. The government was ostensibly the command center of a vast planet-wide army, and every human living on that planet was a conscript.

It was just that, similar to an actual army, not every conscript was assigned a combat role. Some maintained the infrastructure, some

produced tools of war, some generated supplies that the soldiers needed to function… but even these non-combatants were trained fighters.

And that was merely the mundane population.

There were also the elites of this militant society — the Awakened, who had been forged into a perfect warrior caste by the Nightmare Spell. Only those who survived the horrors of the First Nightmare and the dreadful expanse of the Dream Realm remained, and that cruel selection left little space for a lack of martial talent or inherent weakness.

Among these hardened survivors, only the best of the best rose to the top and became Masters. And among the Masters, only the strongest became Saints.

But Sunny, Effie, and Morgan were not merely Saints. They were not merely some of the strongest humans out there — they were the absolute best among the absolute elites… the most deadly and vicious children of the cold new era.

Sunny in particular had risen higher than almost anyone before.

So what chance did these mercenaries have against them?

…Carving a bloody path to the heart of the Castle, the four of them reached the throne room at the same time as Saint and Mordret.

Chapter-2539: Urban Fantasy

"How is it?"

Sunny quietly retreated and looked at his companions with a somber expression. He did not have anything reassuring to say.

"Basically... It's a death trap."

The throne room of Mirage Castle was almost as grand and enormous as that of Bastion. The domed ceiling was tremendously high, and there were arched galleries running the length of the great hall halfway to the floor.

Since Sunny, Effie, Morgan, and the Other Mordret had entered the main keep from the aerial bridge, they arrived at a hidden entrance to one of the galleries as opposed to the towering gates leading to the main floor of the throne room.

Sunny had entered the gallery stealthily and eliminated the mercenaries perched there without making any noise. That allowed him to take a peek at what was happening below.

It seemed like Madoc's forces were preparing to make a last stand under the throne of Mirage. There were staggered rows of barricades and countless armed henchmen hiding behind them, ready to open fire at the gate the moment someone tried to open it. Worse still, there was too much space between the gate and the barricades — the throne room was just that vast.

It was a killing field.

Sunny scowled, unsure what to do. Even if they flanked the enemies by opening fire from the gallery, the sheer number of mercenaries would make it hard for anyone to survive the squall of bullets — worse than that, some of them seemed to be armed with automatic

rifles and submachine guns instead of the semi-automatic pistols the previous ones had wielded.

At this point, Sunny would not be surprised to learn that the enemy even had a crate of grenades or two stashed somewhere in the throne room. Or a rocket launcher... rocket launchers were a thing, right?

He vaguely remembered something like that from the Devil Detective's memories.

Sunny was a bit stunned.

'How come these private security goons are armed so much better than the police?'

Then again, Legacies were always better equipped than the government Awakened, too.

More importantly, how was he going to deal with this thoroughly entrenched, heavily armed force?

There were sporadic sounds of gunfire, screams, and muffled booms reaching the throne room through the closed gate, coming closer and closer. The castle trembled from time to time, and dust poured from the ceiling...

Saint was drawing near.

Sunny, Effie, and Morgan were going to have to act when she arrived, no matter whether they had a plan or not.

He studied his companions for a moment, and then said in a somber tone:

"Listen. Here is the…"

But then, Sunny felt silent.

That was because something had changed. The sounds of gunfire, screams, and muffled booms stopped abruptly, and the throne room was suddenly enveloped in eerie silence.

The mercenaries below shifted nervously, aiming their guns at the gate.

Sunny cursed and moved toward the parapet of the gallery, feeling that something was going to happen once the silence was broken.

And it did.

'What…'

The towering gates did not open, and neither were they broken down. Instead, they simply disintegrated, consumed by a great flood of darkness. As the crushing black torrent rushed into the throne room, Sunny thought that the Castle was drowned by the lake, somehow — however, a moment later, he realized that the flood had nothing to do with water.

It was a vast river of true darkness.

The swirling mass of darkness moved as if it possessed a mind of its own, splitting into countless streams as it crushed into the floor of the throne room. Flooding the killing field like a surging wave, it washed over the barricades and swallowed them.

A moment later, horrified screams and sounds of gunfire filled the grand hall. The muzzle flashes bloomed in the embrace of true darkness, only to be suffocated the next moment. A graceful figure moved under the cover of the dark flood, wading through the gunfire to silence the voices of the terrified mercenaries one after another.

Sunny shook off his trance and raised his gun.

"What are you waiting for? Shoot them!"

He opened fire first, aiming at the henchmen that were the furthest away from the raging flood of true darkness. A heartbeat later, Effie and Morgan joined him, using their elevated position to pick off the mercenaries with deadly precision.

Mordret stood just a step away, watching the dreadful spectacle of Saint conquering the throne room of Mirage Castle with wide eyes.

"Detective, t—that…"

He stammered for a moment, and then finished his sentence in a hesitant tone:

"...is the wrong genre, I think?"

Sunny barely heard his question through the cannonade.

"What… the hell are you talking about?! Snap out of it and take cover, damn it!"

The Other Mordret flinched and belatedly ducked down.

"Apologies!"

Ejecting a spent magazine, Sunny reached for a new one and discovered that he had run out of ammunition. Cursing quietly, he threw the gun away and unholstered his revolver, which still had a single bullet left.

He did not get the opportunity to use it, though…

Because by then, the slaughter was over.

The throne room grew quiet once again. The screaming stopped, and the sounds of gunfire stopped, as well.

The river of darkness swirled and retreated, being absorbed into Saint's body.

Standing among the corpses, she looked up and cast her indifferent gaze at the throne of Mirage.

Her face was covered in soot and blood, seeming too beautiful to belong to a human… in fact, at that moment, her inhuman beauty was eerie and haunting.

Just then, the silence was suddenly broken by the sound of applause.

Looking over to the gallery on the opposite side of the throne room, Sunny saw Mordret.

The Prince of Nothing was leaning against an arch, clapping his hands as he looked down with an amused expression.

"Wonderfully done, Dr. Saint! Truly remarkable. I'm in awe."

Then, he looked in Sunny's direction and smiled.

"Oh, by the way. Has anyone seen my uncle?"

Chapter-2540: Adverse Weather Conditions

Soon enough, Sunny and his companions descended to the floor of the throne room. Mordrert walked down the stone steps leading to the gallery, as well, wiping blood off his hands.

They met under the throne of Mirage, where Saint was still standing still, absorbing tendrils of white mist that stretched toward her from the corpses littering the floor.

Mordret's stylish viridian suit did not look much better than the tattered raincoat the Other Mordret was wearing by then — that only made them look more alike. Sunny did not have the time to ponder how they managed to look unmistakably distinct despite being exactly the same, though.

He frowned, noticing that there was something wrong with Saint.

As more and more nothingness entered her body, her impassive expression seemed to be turning a little strained. It was as if she was struggling with something — at some point, she even grimaced and gritted her teeth, a subtle crease appearing on her brow.

She did not seem to be wounded or in pain, so…

'I think I know what is happening.'

Sunny did not exactly have proof to support his suspicion, but he felt that Saint… was nearing an evolution, or maybe even suppressing it on purpose. Before, she used to gain shadow fragments by consuming Memories — later, after he lost connection to the Spell, that avenue of growth vanished. She had only received fragments once since that day… after killing one of Mordret's Reflections. At least Sunny thought that she did.

Slaying the Others in Mirage City must have finally allowed her to reach the limit — and now, she was on the verge of ascending to either a new Rank or a new Class. It was just that Saint was resisting the evolution, unwilling to leave Sunny in times of need.

Whether she was doing it consciously or unconsciously, he did not know.

This was the good news. The bad news, meanwhile…

"He's not here."

Morgan's voice sounded somber.

There was indeed no trace of Madoc in the throne room. He had not perished in the throne room, either — the corpses of the mercenaries did not dissolve into white mist completely yet, and his body was not among them.

Sunny frowned.

"We must have dealt with most, if not all, of his minions. So where is he? Has he fled deep into the castle?"

What was the point of forcing the mercenaries to take a last stand here if Madoc himself had not been protected by them?

Mirage Castle was vast, so searching it from top to bottom was going to take a lot of time — time they did not necessarily have, both because of Castellan's probable reaction to Saint breaking the rules of Mirage City and because Madoc could slip away and escape while they were searching.

"Where would he go? Any ideas?"

Effie shrugged. Morgan frowned and shook her head. Mordret scratched the tip of his nose.

"Ah, I must admit that I am not entirely sure."

At that moment, the Other Mordret said in a tentative tone:

"Actually, I might have an idea."

They all looked at him, causing him to cough a couple of times.

After staying silent for a bit, he pointed to the wall of the throne room opposite the gate.

"I was personally involved in the Mirage Museum project, so I am somewhat familiar with the layout here. That small door over there leads to a spiral staircase, and that staircase leads all the way to the roof of the Castle's highest tower. We wanted to create an observation platform there, for the visitors of the museum to enjoy the view of the city across the lake."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"So? Why would Madoc flee to the roof of that tower? It's not like he can escape from there, and I am pretty sure that he is not going to jump."

The Other Mordret sighed.

"Sadly, the observation platform had to be scrapped, in the end, because the tower is really very high, and we couldn't figure out a way to fit an elevator anywhere while preserving the historical interiors of the Castle at the same time. So… we built a helipad on the roof, instead."

Sunny blinked a few times.

"I see. I can't help but ask, though…"

He raised an eyebrow.

"What the hell is a helipad?"

The Other Mordret seemed a little confused by the question.

"Well… it's a landing area for a helicopter."

Sunny gave him a deadpan look.

"What the hell is a helicopter?"

The Other Mordrert seemed both confused and a little embarrassed now.

"Oh. A helicopter is a kind of flying vehicle. People use it sometimes to reach distant areas, or simply to save time… it's handy to have one or two on standby."

He looked up and contemplated something for a few moments.

"The weather is not at all fit for flying, but it would not be impossible either."

Sunny frowned.

'A flying vehicle?'

There were not a lot of those in the real world, for various reasons — not the least of which was the fact that winged Nightmare Creatures were a death sentence for anyone foolish enough to entrust their life to a fragile alloy construct.

Even land and water vehicles were difficult to protect in the world of the Nightmare Spell, and those could be weighed down by an almost limitless amount of armor. Plus, the passengers would not plummet to their deaths if such vehicles sustained a little damage.

There was also the fact that terrible things happened to people who got too close to space. Sunny had learned that fact from Jet a long time ago, and back then, neither of them had known the reason. Now, he knew that it was because of the Nightmare Gate hidden on the dark side of the Moon, and the creature guarding it.

In any case, the idea of a flying vehicle was somewhat alien to Sunny. He was accustomed to seeing Saints, dragons, and all kinds of horrors fly, but not machines.

He was currently in a world different from his own, though.

"Wait, so you are saying… that Madoc can just fly away if he reaches that helipad?"

The Other Mordret offered him a smile.

"It is just a guess. Personally, I would avoid climbing into a helicopter during a rainstorm."

Sunny did not respond, because he was already running toward the small door the Other Mordret had pointed out.

"Hurry, damn it!"

Climbing to the top of the great tower of Mirage Castle was a torturous affair, but they did make it in time.

Diving into the rain, with the dark sky above him, Sunny saw the world turn white from a flash of lightning.

And in that white light, he finally laid his eyes on Madoc.

Chapter-2541: The Harder They Fall

The roof of the great tower was flat, with a low parapet running around its perimeter. The stones were slick and wet, covered in water — the sky above was dark with storm clouds, and torrential rain pelted everything with a primal fury. The winds here were strong, as well, howling as they strained to push anyone foolish enough to ascend the tower down, into a fatal fall.

It really seemed like the heavens had burst open, unleashing a world-ending flood.

The flying vehicle — a helicopter — stood in the middle of the roof, and Madoc was standing in front of it.

…Sunny was not sure what a helicopter was supposed to look like, really, but he was pretty sure that it was not supposed to be on fire, tilted to one side, and spouting billowing pillars of acrid black smoke.

'Huh?'

Just as Sunny leaped over the last few steps of the long staircase, feeling his leg muscles burning, there was a bright flash. A moment later, a blinding bolt of lightning struck the burning machine, sending a swarm of sparks flying in all directions.

Madoc staggered back, covering his face with an arm.

Sunny froze for a split second.

'Well, well, well…'

He remembered the previous bolts of lightning that had landed somewhere above them during the battle for the courtyard. Back

then, he did not waste any time thinking where they had struck… but really, it made sense. This was the highest point of the Castle, and there was nothing around them but the vast expanse of the lake.

Naturally, lightning would be attracted to a huge machine made of metal standing on an elevated point.

It seemed that whoever the Other Mordret had paid to design this helipad was terrible at their job. Sunny was not going to complain, though — it was high time for him to get a little lucky. Now, at least, the enemy was not going to escape at the last moment.

Raising his revolver, Sunny aimed it at the Chairman of the Valor Group.

"Freeze!"

Madoc spun around, piercing him with an infuriated gaze.

"You vermin…"

Anger, indignation, humiliation — there were a lot of hues to his voice, but remorse was not one of them. Even now that he had nowhere else to run, he was not sorry for what he had done… he was only sorry about getting caught. Outraged by it, really.

Hearing his companions catching up, Sunny smiled darkly and said in a cold, even tone:

"Mr. Madoc… you are under arrest."

The wind howled louder as he said those words.

'Ah… it feels good.'

Sunny was not the Devil Detective. Still, he had walked a mile in the troubled detective's shoes, and had experienced his obsessive determination to bring the Nihilist to justice — even if it meant going against the omnipotent Valor Group.

The Nihilist did not really exist, but his victims had not become less real because of that. Seven people had been brutally murdered, and

now, the man responsible for their deaths was standing in front of him.

Even if both the victims and the killer were not real people, and the details of the case had simply been concocted by the Castellan, it still felt good to solve it. Looking at Madoc, Sunny felt a strange sense of accomplishment.

Madoc, meanwhile, snarled.

"Under arrest? Me?!"

He laughed.

"Sure, go ahead. Arrest me! Let us see if there is an attorney in this city who dares to prosecute me, or a judge who dares to convict me."

Sunny's smile turned darker still.

"You know, Mr. Madoc… it's not very wise to boast about something like that to a man aiming a gun at you."

At that moment, Effie and the rest finally arrived. Saint appeared on the roof last, looking even more haggard than she had in the throne room.

Madoc's eyes widened a little when he saw Morgan. Then, he froze and scowled when two versions of Mordret came into view.

"What is this…"

Taking a step back, Madoc rubbed his eyes and stared at the two identical men once more. For a moment, he looked unsure of himself, but then his expression returned to normal. He seemed to have come up with some kind of explanation to resolve the maddening contradiction of the world.

"A stand-in? Ha! I should have known…"

The Other Mordret sighed.

"Uncle…"

His expression was troubled.

Just as Sunny was satisfied with finally catching the true culprit behind the Nihilist killings, the Other Mordret must have felt the opposite. The Castellan had changed the background of Mirage City to cater to its new guests, but by doing so, the truth familiar to its sole permanent inhabitant had also been changed.

Perhaps the Other Mordret wanted to tell his uncle that it was not his fault. After all, Madoc had not been a murderous conspirator just a few days ago — he had been made into the mastermind of the Nihilist murders by the Castellan.

But what was the point?

Saying something like that meant admitting that Madoc was not a real person. And if he was not a real person, telling him anything had no point.

The Other Mordret seemed to be caught in this bitter contradiction, not knowing what to say.

His counterpart, however, had no such problem.

As Madoc backed away, Mordret took a step forward and smiled.

"Ah. As much as it pains me to admit, I am starting to see the allure of living in this sweet illusion. I was denied the pleasure of killing Whispering Blade with my own two hands, but now, the Great Mirror is offering me another chance. Of course, it is not exactly the real deal… but beggars can't be choosers. Can we?"

Madoc's back met the parapet, and he looked back with a wary expression.

"Well played, nephew, well played. You drove me into a corner. I hope you don't think that I am out of cards, though… police, really? Do you really think that you can bring me down with just that?"

Mordret's smile just widened slightly.

Effie stared at his back for a moment, then turned to Sunny with a

confused expression.

"Alright… we got him. But what do we do with him now? How are we going to lure out the Castellan?"

Sunny frowned.

That was a good question, indeed.

"I think…"

But before he could answer, Mordret finally reached the reflection of his uncle.

Without saying anything else or changing his expression, he calmly raised a hand and pushed Madoc over the parapet.

Everything happened so fast that none of them managed to react in time. By the time the Other Mordret flinched and Morgan took an involuntary step forward, Madoc was already gone from view.

A panicked scream resounded from the darkness, muffled by the howling of the wind and the roaring thunder.

Half a dozen seconds later, the scream was cut abruptly somewhere far below.

Mordret dusted off his hands and turned to them with a pleasant smile.

"Well, that's taken care of."

For some reason, Sunny did not like the look of his smile.

'Am I… missing something?'

He scowled, trying to understand why he was suddenly feeling uneasy. Surely, it was not because of Madoc's death — the only surprising thing about it was that it had come abruptly and without warning. He had not really expected Madoc to survive, to begin with.

However…

Before Sunny could finish the thought, he was interrupted once again.

This time, it was because of a low, rumbling sound that suddenly washed over them, shaking the very foundations of the world.

Chapter-2542: Flowing Water

A distant, rumbling roar washed over the world, making it seem as if everything had gone still for a moment. It sounded like an enormous beast was stirring awake somewhere far away, rising from its slumber as forests and mountains rolled off its broad shoulders.

There was a flash of lightning. Half-blinded by the rain, Sunny unconsciously took a step toward the parapet. The others did the same, all looking in a single direction with tense, confused expressions — toward the source of the rumbling sound.

They were facing north.

"What…"

Effie's voice drowned in a deafening thunderclap.

Sunny inhaled sharply.

Somehow, he knew what had happened… and what was going to happen, as well.

The world was dark, obscured by the heavy storm clouds. Still, some light penetrated their thick barrier, and Mirage City was enveloped in a dim twilight. The restless surface of the Mirror Lake was stirring in front of them, and beyond it, the great mass of the drowning city sprawled on the distant shore.

Beyond the city were the mountains… and the ancient barrier of the Northern Dam.

That dam was breaking apart now, unable to endure the crushing weight of the artificial lake hidden behind it. It had held proud for thousands of years, withstanding the ruthless tyranny of time and the furious assaults of natural forces… but it had not been able to

withstand human corruption.

The subpar renovation works perpetrated by the Valor Group on Madoc's orders had compromised its integrity, and the disastrously persistent rains had caused the great reservoir contained by the dam to swell uncontrollably, pushing it to and over the limit.

And now, it could not hold any longer.

Sunny's eyes widened as he watched the calamity unfold.

At first, it was a single crack that appeared on the great dam. The floodgates had already been opened to relieve the pressure, with foaming torrents of water pouring down from a vast height; however, that was not enough. The crack split the dam from top to bottom, spreading across its surface with the speed of lightning…

It was narrow and barely noticeable, almost impossible to see. However, a moment later, that small crack became a devastating breach.

The still water of the reservoir had become an unstoppable monster, wielding power so terrible that millions of tons of stone and concrete were flung outward as if shot from a cannon. The entire middle section of the dam exploded, with giant chunks of stone flying into the outskirts of the city below and crushing residential buildings as if they were paper boxes.

What followed the destructive debris was much worse, though.

Sunny froze, enthralled by the harrowing visage and unable to move. His companions were motionless, as well, witnessing the scene of utter destruction in a deafening silence.

The water roared as it escaped its prison. It rushed through the wide breach in the damaged dam like a living being, hungering for human souls. The titanic torrent was too vast for its scale to be fathomed, or for its force to be measured — looking at it, Sunny felt something that he had not felt in a long time.

The utter, terrifying awe that mortals felt in the face of the insurmountable power that dwarfed their very existence — the

dreadful power of hostile, untamed nature.

The torrent of water struck the outskirts of Mirage City and swallowed them whole, flowing far and wide to consume everything in sight. The buildings, the streets, the rushing PTVs, the tiny figures of the terrified people — all of it was washed away in an instant, crushed and broken, ground into nothingness and drowned in the foaming expanse of raging water.

Of course, the flood did not stop there.

The powerful current rushing through the breach in the dam did not weaken — on the contrary, as more of the dam collapsed, it became more potent. The great tidal wave that had swallowed the outskirts continued south, devastating the northern areas of Mirage City. The rivers running toward the Mirror Lake swelled and overflowed, escaping their beds.

Their flooding caused by that was merely a promise of the imminent disaster, though.

All across the city, the heavy iron covers of the drainage pipes were sent flying into the air. Towering plumes of foaming water shot upward like geysers. It was only then that the thunderous roar of the collapsing dam reached the distant parts of Mirage City, and people on the streets froze in place, looking north with confused expressions.

The flood utterly crushed and destroyed the northernmost parts of Mirage City...

However, the rest of it was not spared, either.

Even if the obliterating force of the tidal wave had been exhausted as it moved further away from the broken dam, the water still continued flowing. In the districts north of Mirror Lake, the water flowed freely across the streets, rising higher and higher. It swallowed the PTVs and the pedestrians, collecting an unimaginable death toll.

Some of the buildings were partially flooded, some even submerged in the water completely. The citizens trapped in them had not survived, either.

Standing by Sunny's side, Effie let out a strange cry and grabbed the parapet, her fingers turning white.

Finally, the flood reached the Mirror Lake.

It stopped the torrent for a while. However, the level of water in the lake swiftly rose — soon enough, the slopes of the mountain and the stone steps leading to the Castle disappeared beneath the surging waves, leaving only the platform directly in front of the great gates above the tide.

By then, the Mirror Lake had overflowed, as well.

A secondary wave poured from the confines of its shores, joining the flood as it rushed south. The narrow streets there funneled the water, giving the torrents more strength. Nothing could withstand the terrible force of the flowing water, and everyone who had been looking north minutes earlier drowned with terrified expressions on their faces, unable to escape.

Everything in sight had drowned in the vast, unstoppable current.

Sunny had seen this scene before… he had seen it countless times. Every time the night came to the Forgotten Shore, the Dark Sea would flood the Crimson Labyrinth and destroy anything and anyone who had not found shelter from its fury. Only, this time, it was not abominations that were being destroyed by the rushing water — it was people.

The streets of Mirage City become their watery grave.

Something like that must have happened in the True Bastion, as well, thousands of years ago.

Soon enough, the Mirror Lake seemed to have expanded greatly, growing to cover the entire area where Mirage City had once stood. Here and there, the edifices of skyscrapers rose from the water like orphaned towers, but most of the city was hidden under the mass of water.

At the heart of the great lake, the Castle stood lonesomely among the waves.

The Other Mordret swayed as he took a step back. His expression at the moment was hard to describe, even if someone was in a state to pay attention to such details.

Everyone seemed stunned and petrified by what they had just witnessed.

…Except for Sunny.

Sunny, on the contrary, was restless.

'I missed it. I missed it. Damn it! How could I have been so foolish?! How could I have been fooled again?!'

While everyone stood still, he suddenly spun around and raised his revolver.

Aiming it at Mordret's head, Sunny then gritted his teeth and pressed the trigger.

Chapter-2543: Double Cross

It was impossible to dodge a bullet… for a mundane human, at least.

And yet, that was exactly what Mordret did.

He had been looking at the harrowing sight of the drowning city with the rest of them a split second ago. But when Sunny's revolver thundered, aimed at his head point-blank, he leaned sideways with superhuman speed, allowing the bullet to fly past.

'Damn it.'

Mordret took a step back, coming to stand near his other fragment.

The first to react was Saint, even if she only turned to look in his direction. Morgan and Effie spun around, wary and trying to understand what had happened. The Other Mordret was the last to realize what had happened, reeling back in shock.

Mordret reached a hand and grabbed his arm, preventing him from losing his balance.

"Goodness gracious, Sunless. What was that for?"

His smile was as pleasant as ever, but it did not reach his eerie, mirror-like eyes.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"That was to slow you down."

He knew, of course, that simply shooting Mordret was not going to kill him. But it was bound to destroy his body and force him to search for a new one.

In fact…

'I should have aimed for the other one.'

Sunny belatedly realized that he had made a mistake. But there was no time to feel regret.

He finally realized the source of the feeling that he was missing something that had been plaguing him ever since the throne room. Sadly, it was already too late.

'His hands are clean.'

When Mordret descended from the gallery, his hands were bloodied. But now, they were clean… it was a small detail that would not have mattered in most circumstances, but held a frightening meaning here in Mirage City.

Sunny had failed to register the fact completely. But just now, as they were watching the city drown, he saw something in the periphery of his vision. It was so subtle that he paid it no attention at first, yet his subconscious kept pushing the thought of it to the forefront of his mind.

That something… was a thin tendril of white mist.

Almost impossible to see in the heavy rain, it flowed from below the parapet and slowly reached Mordret.

And was absorbed into his body.

That white mist was the essence of the Other who had played the role of Madoc before being killed by the Prince of Nothing. The body had fallen all the way down to the courtyard, shattering as it crashed into the roofs of the main keep first. It had taken the mist quite some time to reach all the way to the highest point of the great tower…

That was probably the very reason why Mordret had chosen to kill Madoc by pushing him down.

The body was gone now, just like the bodies of Others slain by Saint disappeared without a trace.

That was why the blood was gone from Mordret's hands — the

corpses of the mercenaries he had killed dissolved into mist, and their blood followed.

'I should have realized sooner.'

Sunny cursed himself bitterly.

It made so much sense, in hindsight. There were too many strange things about the Palace of Imagination, so, overwhelmed by them, he had not thought about the reason why Saint was able to absorb the ghostly essence of reflections in detail. The answer was obvious, though — it was because she had an affinity to Nothing.

And who had the same affinity, as well?

It was Mordret, the Prince of Nothing.

And the Other Mordret, too.

The latter had spent most of his life in Mirage City, but unlike his ruthless alter ego, he was not a murderous fiend. There had been no reason for him to kill anyone, and even if there had been, he wouldn't have — that was simply out of character for him. So, even after spending decades in the Palace of Imagination, he had never absorbed Nothing, and had never regained his Awakened power.

But Mordret was different. He slaughtered the mercenaries and killed Madoc… gods only knew how many Others he had slain before meeting Sunny. Which meant that he had at least some of his power back, and had been hiding it.

And that… did not bode well.

It did not bode well at all.

Mordret laughed.

"Ah, it seems that I've been caught."

Effie studied him tensely, then asked without looking away:

"Sunny? What is going on?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, feverishly trying to understand what Mordret was planning. Had he already reclaimed some of his power when they fought several days ago? Had he been pretending to be weak in order to lower Sunny's guard? Had every word spoken by Mordret been chosen carefully in order to manipulate him into doing what Mordret wanted him to do?

What was he trying to achieve? Kill Morgan? Absorb the essence of the Castellan?

Or something else?

"We are being double-crossed, that is what."

Glaring at Mordret, he lowered his empty revolver and asked in a cold, murderous tone:

"Let me guess — that whole conversation about wanting to hide your other self on the Ivory Island to protect him from the Dreamspawn was a lie."

Mordret shrugged with a smile.

"Of course. Did you really think I would entrust you with something so vital? To be honest, I never believed that either you or the Changing Star would be able to protect him from that fiend. You know what they say, Sunless… if you want something done well, do it yourself. So thank you kindly for the offer, but I won't be needing your services; we will go our own way, he and I."

Sunny smirked.

"What? You think that you'll do a better job of protecting him than two Sovereigns?"

Mordret's smile dimmed slightly.

"As a matter of fact... yes. I do believe that. You two have too much to lose, you see — the whole world, really. And that is exactly what the Dreamspawn will use to destroy you. But me?"

He grinned.

"I have nothing. And therefore, I have nothing to lose."

With that, he strengthened his grip on the Other Mordret's arm.

The Other Mordret looked at Morgan, wanting to say something…

But he never did.

Because in the next moment, he was gone.

He vanished without a trace, as if he had never existed at all.

Chapter-2544: Mirror Abyss

"Where did he… go?"

Effie's tone changed halfway through the sentence as she realized the pointlessness of her question.

The answer was obvious.

"Into the bastard's personal Mirror Realm."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

Of course…

He had known about Mordret's Ascended Ability for a long time. It allowed the Prince of Nothing to establish a physical space in the realm of reflections and store objects in it… as well as his morbid collection of vessels.

But that was not all he could place into his minor Domain.

He could pull people into the Mirror Realm, too.

Sunny had been drawn into it once himself, in Twilight. He remembered it vividly — the vast and somber expanse, a grey sky covered by stormy clouds, white mist swirling around his feet, and a radiant sphere shining like a pale sun above, its rays falling like silver pillars through the veil of clouds.

Mordret's Mirror Realm was a reflection of his Soul Sea... at least it had been when he was a Master. Now that he was a Saint, his personal Mirror Realm would have evolved into a minor Domain and came to resemble that of Soul Stealer, most likely.

He looked at Mordret with a hint of dark resentment in his eyes. Mordret chuckled.

"Yes, indeed. Back when I needed to hide him, all those years back, I was merely Awakened. I did not have such a convenient power yet… but I do now. Is there a better place to hide my Flaw than my own Soul Sea? Where would he ever be safer? Nowhere… as long as I keep him imprisoned in my soul, I will always be able to keep an eye on him. So, I had to retrieve him from the Palace of Imagination before the Dreamspawn did it for me."

He sighed.

"Of course, various obstacles got in the way. I did not expect Morgan to be here and poison the pathetic worm's illusion with her bloodlust. I did not expect such an elaborate illusion to exist, either… this place had been quite different when I visited last, you see. Most of all, I did not expect to be stripped of my Aspect and be hunted down by the Castellan like a rat. That was quite a troublesome development, to say the least."

A pale smile appeared on Mordret's lips.

"Ah, but I endured and persevered. You suspected me of being the Nihilist, Sunless, but of course, I did not kill those people. Which is not to say… that I didn't kill other people."

He laughed.

"It's just I would never be so careless as to leave bodies lying around. I planned to dispose of them using the drainage collectors at first, but what would you know? There was no need. My victims, unlike those of the Nihilist, simply disappeared like mist."

Mordret inhaled deeply and looked at the harrowing vista of the drowned city with regret.

"Such a waste… ah, but no matter. I managed to survive the pursuit of the Castellan and even recover some of my power — not enough to unlock my Ascended Ability, sadly, and not nearly enough to take the axis of this entire world and get out alive. With all my spare attires destroyed, I needed someone who possessed a role in this bizarre world to do it for me — to get me close to my Flaw, at the right moment. You have my gratitude for that, Sunless."

He shrugged.

"Oh, and for bringing me all these mercenaries on a silver platter. With their lives and that of Madoc, I finally managed to regain access to my Mirror Realm. So… this is where we say goodbye, I guess."

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"What a polite farewell. Something tells me that this is not how you were planning to part with us, though… you were probably planning to kill us first before leaving to turn the tables and hunt down the Castellan like a rat, instead. However, you failed to anticipate one thing, didn't you?"

He looked at Mordret with a chilling darkness nestling in his eyes.

"You failed to anticipate Saint."

Saint moved slightly at that moment, looking at Mordret with cold, frightening indifference.

His smile faltered for a split second.

"Why, yes. I loathe to admit it, but I really did not anticipate that your beautiful companion would turn out to be one of Nether's children. What an ill-fated coincidence… or maybe a fortuitous one, who's to say? Ah, but you are wrong, Sunless."

He raised a hand and rubbed his temple, a strange grimace appearing on his face for a brief moment.

"I never intended to kill you. Morgan, sure. Raised by Wolves, as well, to eliminate the risk of her regaining a measure of control over the Palace of Imagination before I escaped it. But even though I would love nothing more than to see you pay for the death of my father… pay terribly... I need you alive."

A pale smile bloomed on his lips.

"After all, I need you and Changing Star to last as long as possible against the Dreamspawn. The guiding light and the shadow of humanity… you are meant to be my meat shield, you know. What an

honor."

Laughing, he took a step back.

"So live long, Sunless. Live long and struggle desperately. Oh, and by the way…"

Mordret made a dramatic pause, looking at him with a smile.

'That damn miscreant…'

In the short moment Sunny spent feverishly considering what to do next, Morgan suddenly stepped forward.

Her gloves were long gone, and her delicate, pale fingers were spread slightly, glistening with the drops of rain like ten razor-sharp knives.

"What? Can't come up with something else to say to stall more?"

Casting a brief look at Sunny, she said in an even tone:

"Take Athena and go find the Castlellan, Lord of Shadows. Dr. Saint and I will hold him back."

Sunny gave her a long look.

Morgan was mundane, and Mordret seemed to have regained the power of an Ascended. Challenging him would be absolutely deadly for her, even with Saint fighting by her side.

But that wasn't even the main problem.

"How are you going to hold him back? His Dormant Ability allows him to jump between reflections. He can slip away anytime he wants."

Morgan smiled darkly.

"He might have regained some power, but he did not regain all of his power. Actually, although he is hiding it, he is barely holding it together… because of the rain."

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

The rain…

Mordret could sense reflections and travel between them. And currently, there were millions of tiny mirrors around them — every drop of rain reflected the world as it fell from the sky, and all those reflections multiplied as they contained each other, creating an endless labyrinth of mirrors.

Mordret's mind was constantly assaulted by that boundless abyss of reflections, and even if he attempted to hide it, it must have put an immense strain on him.

More importantly…

Morgan spoke again:

"He can indeed escape into reflections, but first, he needs to find the right one. That is why he wasted time giving us a winded speech, and that is why he has not escaped yet. So… go. Hurry!"

Sunny looked at her, then at Mordret.

Mordret smiled.

"Ah, my dear sister makes some sense. But, you see…"

However, he could not finish the sentence.

Because at that moment, Sunny spun around and grabbed Effie, shouting:

"Saint!"

And a split second later, Saint vanished from where she stood and slammed into Mordret, sending them both crashing into the parapet. Morgan rushed forward, as well.

Sunny did not see it, though, because he was already running toward the stairs.

Chapter-2545: Reflections upon Reflections

Sunny and Effie rushed down the long spiral staircase, jumping over several stone steps with each stride. The great tower shook around them as Mordret, Morgan, and Saint clashed on its roof — Sunny did not know who would win in that fight or for how long the two women would be able to hold the Prince of Nothing back, so there was no time to waste.

Effie seemed to understand that, as well.

"I just have one question!"

She failed to make a tight enough turn and slammed into a wall, using it to direct her momentum.

"How the hell are we supposed to find the Castellan?!"

Sunny was cursing the height of the great tower and the length of the stairs when he heard the question — his muscles had already been burning because of the climb up, and now, he had to descend the same way in a rush.

'Where to find the Castellan, indeed…'

At the moment, he was going over everything that Mordret had told him and trying to understand which of his words were true, and which were a lie.

Mordret was a frighteningly skilled manipulator, and he knew how to masterfully mix truth and deceit to control his targets. In hindsight, he had to be — humans naturally rejected anyone who was not like them, and so, he would have had to read their thoughts and emotions flawlessly if he wanted to fit in. Even before that, he would have

become adept at reading emotions while growing up next to Anvil and Asterion.

That said, Sunny did not think that Mordret had lied about many things here in Mirage City — just about the most important things. That was because he had needed Sunny and Effie to know the true state and function of the Palace of Imagination in order to use them as proxy agents against the Castellan.

He had definitely exaggerated how dangerous the Castellan was to anyone who wasn't him, somewhat, while at the same time understating how rough a shape the Castellan was in.

The flood that destroyed Mirage City… was most likely a manifestation of that ancient reflection failing to endure the pressure of having to incorporate conflicting desires into its grand illusion without the guidance of the Castle Master.

The Castellan was breaking down, just like the northern dam had, and the illusion of Mirage City was breaking down with it.

So… where would Sunny find the Castellan?

Most of Mirage City was gone, now. Only the tallest buildings remained above the water… and the Castle, of course. There was a slim chance that the Castellan was in one of the remaining buildings, but Sunny doubted that. No, the ancient reflection would be somewhere here, in the stronghold of its former master.

But where?

It was not the throne room or the roof of the great tower. It was not the courtyard, either. The Castle was vast, and there were plenty of halls in it…

Sunny looked at Effie.

"You know the layout of Bastion pretty well, right? This replica of the Castle seems smaller, but there should be some similarity. How similar are they?"

By then, they had almost reached the throne room.

"Pretty similar!"

Sunny nodded.

"So, how would one get to the Great Mirror?"

Effie almost stumbled.

"The Great Mirror?"

There was the true Great Mirror, standing in the middle of the Hall of Imagination in True Bastion. But there was also the false Great Mirror, hidden deep inside the mountain under the illusory Bastion — that one, the rulers of Clan Valor and later Effie had used to control the Component of the great Citadel that allowed it to travel between reality and illusions.

The false Great Mirror led to True Bastion, while the real Great Mirror led to the Palace of Imagination…

But there was a Castle in Mirage City, as well.

So, wouldn't it be natural to assume that there would be a third version of the Great Mirror here, as well?

'Just how deep does this infinity mirror go…'

Effie remained motionless for a moment, looking around with a bewildered expression, then nodded resolutely.

"Follow me!"

They rushed to an alcove behind the throne, where another door was hidden behind a tapestry. The Castle itself was a labyrinth, but Effie was able to navigate it with at least some level of confidence — she had been ruling Bastion for more than a year, after all, so this was a replica of her seat of power.

"Where is it, where is it…"

Soon, they stopped near an unassuming wall. Looking around, Effie pulled on a metal torch holder fastened to the wall, then turned it

slightly.

A section of the wall suddenly receded and then slid sideways, revealing a dark passage.

Effie smiled faintly.

"Still works."

However, in the next moment, both of them froze.

"What… what is this?"

As soon as the secret passage opened, a strange sound reached their ears.

It was quiet and subtle, as if coming from a great distance, but also impossible to ignore due to how out of place it seemed.

Sunny was pretty sure that what they heard… was music.

It was a clear sound of strings being plucked to sing a haunting, melancholic melody.

They looked at each other, not knowing how to react.

"Let's… proceed."

Effie nodded, just as bewildered and disturbed as Sunny.

They entered the secret passage, traversed a maze of dusty stone corridors, and reached a deep well leading to the depths of the mountain. A narrow staircase was clinging to its wall — they descended it without wasting any time, knowing that somewhere far above, Morgan and Saint were fighting Mordret with their lives on the line.

The deeper into the depths of the mountain they descended, the clearer and louder the forlorn melody became.

Until it filled their ears completely, making them both feel like they were lost in it.

Soon enough, they reached the bottom of the well and found themselves standing in front of towering gates.

Sunny held his breath for a moment, then took a step forward and pushed the gates open.

Out there behind them stood a vast underground chamber… much too vast for the scale of the mountain, clearly greater than the space it was supposed to take up.

An immense mirror was standing in its heart, towering at least a hundred meters in height. It was covered by a sheet of thin black fabric, which moved slightly in a ghostly wind.

And in front of the Mirror, sitting on the stone floor with his back to them…

Sunny and Effie finally beheld the Castellan.

Chapter-2546: Background Character

Out there in front of the Great Mirror — a reflection of an illusion of the Great Mirror, to be precise — a man was sitting on the cold stone floor, strumming an old guitar.

The slow, wistful melody echoed in the dim expanse of the vast chamber, reflecting from its distant walls. The dead silence that reigned in the depths of the mountain served as an opulent background for the melody, making each note feel full and rich.

As Sunny and Effie entered the chamber of the Great Mirror, the man hummed in a low, pleasant voice.

"Mmmmm… mmmm… mmmmmm…"

Sunny did not know what he had expected the Castellan to look like. However, he definitely did not expect him to be wearing cheap, torn jeans and a faded windbreaker jacket. The man was sitting with his back to the gates, facing the covered mirror — so, they could not see his face. However, they did see that his hair was long and disheveled, in dire need of a brush and shampoo.

"Mmmmm… oh, all of us will dream… mmmm… the nightmare… of the…"

Sunny and Effie glanced at each other.

The Castellan — they were sure that it was him — looked perfectly mundane. He did not show any signs of aggression, either, or any signs of having noticed them at all. Instead, he seemed completely focused on casually picking the strings of his guitar and humming a quiet song in the silence of the underground chamber.

That song was quite eerie, though. Sunny could not make out all of the words, but they sounded cold and ominous, even if the man singing them did not put any emotion except slight melancholy into his voice.

Something about him looked familiar.

They moved forward cautiously, circling the Castellan from both sides. When Sunny finally caught a glimpse of his face, he halted for a moment.

'I've seen him before…'

The man was not at all kempt, but his weathered face was handsome… subtly beautiful, even.

"Wait. Isn't he…"

Effie's voice sounded surprised.

She had a reason to be bewildered, too.

'Wait a minute.'

As it turned out, the Castellan had been near them this whole time. Sunny could remember at least two instances of meeting him — or, rather, noticing him in the background. There were probably more that had gone unnoticed.

The man... was the street musician who had been playing his guitar near the Mirage City Center for Troubled Youths on the day they visited it. He had also been near the psychiatric hospital where Saint worked on the day they kidnapped the Other Mordret. In hindsight, his presence in both places was strange… what kind of musician would busk outside on a rainy day, when everyone was huddled inside? It made little sense.

But Sunny had not paid him any attention. The ragged street musician had been merely one of the countless nameless extras populating Mirage City… he had been nothing more than a part of the background.

So, they had seen him, walked past him, and failed to recognize him for what he truly was.

The Castellan. The custodian of the Palace of Imagination, and the ancient reflection who had usurped the authority over the Great Mirror.

However…

Those were not the only two times Sunny had seen this man. Effie might have been surprised because she recognized the Castellan as the unassuming street musician, but Sunny had a different reason.

In truth, he had seen him even before coming to Mirage City.

The street musician was older, and his face was much more weathered. The clothes were different, and his hair was much longer now. The lower part of his face was covered by a beard, which had not been there before — but there was no mistaking it.

Sunny had seen him in one of the visions bestowed upon him in Ariel's Game.

"He's Omer of the Nine."

His voice sounded even.

Indeed, the Castellan was none other than one of the Nine — a blind poet famed for his songs, who joined Prince Eurys and the rest of them in the quest to slay the gods.

By now, Sunny knew or at least suspected what missions some of the Nine had been meant to complete. Aletheia had been tasked with finding the truth in the depths of Ariel's Tomb. Aemedon the Sculptor had been tasked with building a trap for the gods by delivering that truth to the Demon of Destiny. Orphne… Slayer… had been given the gravest task of all — to kill Weaver, the Demon of Fate.

In which she had succeeded twice.

Eurys had become a slave. And while the details of Auro's mission were still unknown, it was apparently the most harrowing of them

all.

Sunny did not know what task the blind poet, Omer, had received either. However, he knew that Omer's fate had been to become lost in illusions. Now, he understood what that meant…

Omer of the Nine had been sent to the realm of Mirage, the Demon of Imagination. His purpose was unknown, but it had probably been tied to convincing Mirage to answer Nether's call and fight side by side with his siblings in the Doom War.

Daemons were not the most affectionate of siblings, after all. Nether himself had ignored Hope's imprisonment for a thousand years. So, if one thought about it, it was actually strange that all of them — all except Weaver — had risen up against the gods together.

'Some of the Nine must have been sent to other daemons, as well... like Omer.'

As Sunny walked past the Castellan and saw his face clearly, he also saw something far more morbid. In front of the seated man, fourteen human eyes were placed in a half-circle, staring at him with glassy pupils.

Effie cursed quietly.

'The victims of the Nihilist... were all missing their eyes.'

So that was where the missing eyes had gone.

Sunny felt a chill run down his spine.

At that moment, the Castellan fell silent and stopped playing his old guitar. He remained motionless for a few moments, then raised his head and looked at Sunny.

His own eyes were clear and blue like the sea.

"I am not Omer of the Nine."

The Castellan's voice was calm and emotionless.

"I am merely the reflection of Omer of the Nine. I am the custodian of the Palace of Imagination."

Chapter-2547: One Thousand and One

Sunny shivered. It was not every day that he had a conversation with an Other… well, technically, he had conversed with many of them here in Mirage City over the last few days, but he had never spoken to one who knew their nature.

'The reflection of Omer of the Nine…'

Why was the reflection of one of the Nine serving as a custodian of Mirage's palace?

He lingered for a while, then said in a subdued tone:

"Well, you haven't been doing your job well, have you? The place is a mess."

The Castellan remained silent.

Sunny and Effie exchanged glances.

Now that they had found the ancient reflection, they were supposed to get the authority over the Palace of Imagination back to Effie, somehow. The easiest way would be for her to destroy the Castellan, most likely… but Sunny was not sure how powerful the Castellan was, and therefore whether they would be able to shatter him.

Could they convince him to surrender the authority voluntarily? That would be the best outcome, since Effie would be able to use the Castellan to draw much more potential from the Palace of Imagination then. However, Sunny did not know if the reflection of Omer of the Nine could be convinced, either.

In any case, they did not have much time to try.

The Castellan finally spoke:

"...My Mistress is away."

This seemed to be his answer to the accusation of not maintaining the Palace of Imagination properly — this reflection had been designed to help the Castle Master control the Great Mirror, after all, not to control it in their master's stead.

Effie scoffed.

"Who is away? I am the master of the Castle, and therefore your master as well. Yet, not only did you fail to assist me, you even stole my authority and tried to kill me. No wonder this whole place has collapsed. Do you see the problem here?"

The Castellan stared at her silently.

"You are wrong."

'He doesn't seem to be blind anymore… at least not here, in the Palace of Imagination.'

Could Mirage have imagined a world where the blind could see?

While Sunny considered that small detail, Effie raised an eyebrow.

"I'm wrong? What am I wrong about?"

The Castellan lowered his gaze.

"I only have one Mistress — Mirage, the Demon of Imagination. And you are not her. The castle you rule is nothing but a shell… the illusory one is the moat, and the true one is the gate. Both merely lead to the Palace of Imagination. The Palace of the Demon of Imagination, the place where my Mistress resided and ruled, has always been the Great Mirror."

Sunny smiled.

The Castellan was mistaken, of course. There had been a time before Mirage created mirrors, so Bastion was far more ancient than the

Great Mirror. It did not matter which had come first, anyway — now that the Spell made the Castle into a Citadel, they were all inseparable.

It was interesting that this ancient reflection suffered from such a delusion, though…

Nevertheless, Sunny had sensed a note of stubbornness in the Castellan's voice when he denounced Effie's claim to authority over the Great Mirror and proclaimed that he would only ever serve Mirage. It did not feel like challenging his stance directly would be fruitful… but there was also a vulnerability there that could be exploited.

Instead of pressing the reflection of Omer of the Nine on this issue, Sunny glanced at the covered expanse of the replica of the Great Mirror.

"Why is the reflection of one of the Nine serving the Demon of Imagination, anyway?"

The Castellan remained silent for a while.

Then, he carefully plucked the strings of his guitar.

"...It was because my Mistress has become lost in her own illusions. She abandoned the real world, preferring the company of reflections. A fantasy upon fantasy — she lived countless lives in the Palace of Imagination, not caring about what happened outside its walls. And she was happy."

His quiet melody turned wistful.

"But what to do? The Nine needed the Demon of Imagination to join the other daemons in their Rebellion. And so, Omer came to the shores of the Mirror Lake. Who better was there than a poet famous for his tales and songs? Mirage took an interest in him because of how vibrant and inexhaustible his imagination was. And so, she invited him into her Palace."

The Castellan stopped playing and looked into the distance.

"She gave him control of the Great Mirror, so that he could bring his stories to life. Omer created a fantastical realm for her to explore, and a thrilling story for her to experience. Mirage enjoyed his fantasy greatly… but eventually, she grew bored with it. She wanted to reward the blind poet and send him away, but he offered to imagine another fantasy — and with her permission, he did. And then another, and then another."

His gaze grew distant.

"A thousand realms, a thousand tales. No matter how much Mirage tested Omer, his imagination never exhausted itself, just like her sense of wonder and hunger were inexhaustible. They experienced a thousand fantasies together… and when the thousandth fantasy came to an end, Omer made a request to Mirage."

The reflection of Omer put his guitar on the floor.

"So, the Demon of Imagination gave him a final task... she told him to imagine something that she could not imagine herself. Even I do not know what Omer showed her in that final illusion — but when that illusion was eventually dispelled, Mirage left her palace and joined her siblings in the rebellions against the gods. Omer followed her into war, as well."

The Castellan looked at Sunny with emotionless eyes.

"Only I remained."

Sunny smiled faintly.

'What a beautiful story it is…'

But despite the beautiful story, his voice sounded cruel:

"Mirage died in that war, you know. And Omer must have died with her."

He looked down at the Castellan and said evenly:

"You say that your Mistress is away, but you are the one who lured her out, into a hopeless war. You claim to be loyal to Mirage, but you

were the one who destroyed her happiness. You killed her. You are a hypocrite, Omer. Ah, I really hate hypocrites the most."

Only then did the Castellan's gaze finally show hints of emotion.

Chapter-2548: In Her Image

The Castellan's eyes trembled.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then turned his glassy gaze to Sunny. There seemed to be a hint of an emotion hiding behind the cold stillness of his blue eyes, but Sunny was incapable of recognizing what it was.

"I am not Omer of the Nine. I am the reflection of…"

Sunny interrupted him:

"Yes, yes. I know."

Turning away, he looked at the Great Mirror.

Now was the time to press the attack and break the Castellan's conception, but he lingered, suddenly distracted by a strange feeling.

The Great Mirror…

It was calling to him.

It seemed to be exerting a subtle pull on his soul, but apart from that, it was pulling him closer quite literally. Sunny felt as if the Great Mirror was a magnet, and his body was made of iron.

It was as if his blood pressed against the walls of his veins, pushing him to come closer.

Needless to say, that was a bizarre and distracting feeling — enough so that he momentarily lost his train of thought.

'Ah. I see.'

It took him a few moments to understand what was happening.

His blood had a peculiar quality thanks to Blood Weave - its parts always strived to fuse back with the whole. That was the reason why he hardly bled… and at the moment, his blood wanted to reunite with another lost part.

There, behind the black fabric covering the Great Mirror, another piece of Weaver's lineage was waiting for him.

'I found it.'

Sunny allowed himself to feel the thrill of having accomplished his goal. He stared at the Great Mirror for a few moments, motionless, then turned back to the Castellan. His heart was beating rapidly, but no sign of agitation showed on his face.

"You are not Omer of the Nine… but you were him, once. So, is there a difference?"

The Castellan fell silent. His gaze remained inexpressive, but Sunny knew that the ancient reflection was troubled.

It had already been in a sorry state after being abandoned for thousands of years, slowly coming undone — and now, its condition grew even worse because of the clash of human desires it had been forced to endure.

It was strange to assume that a reflection had a mental state, but if it did… the Castellan's mental state was weakened.

If Sunny convinced the Castellan that he had betrayed the Mistress he claimed to be eternally loyal to a long time ago… then maybe, just maybe, the ancient reflection would accept a new master.

Not because the previous one was not worthy of being served, but because the Castellan was not worthy of serving her.

Were reflections capable of feeling guilt?

Beastie, the first Reflection created by Mordret, had never stopped searching for its sealed master. So, the Others could feel some emotions, after all… or were at least capable of learning to feel them.

'We shall see.'

Still conscious of the Great Mirror behind him, Sunny failed to suppress a question. Glancing at it briefly, he asked in a false tone of indifference:

"Why did you cover that mirror, anyway? What's behind that cloth?"

The Castellan lingered for a while. Eventually, he said in a strangely quiet voice:

"Something… I am afraid of."

Sunny raised an eyebrow. Effie seemed surprised, as well.

"Afraid of? What can the being in control of the Palace of Imagination fear within its walls?"

The Castellan watched the black fabric move slightly in the ghostly wind.

His answer was succinct.

"Something beyond my control."

Sunny frowned.

At that moment, a subtle tremor shook the great underground chamber. Streams of dust fell from the ceiling, and with them, a few drops of cold water. The Castellan did not seem to react to it in any way, but Sunny and Effie felt differently.

'There's no time.'

Sunny had to break the Castellan's resolve swiftly — or, if that failed, help Effie destroy him.

He opened his mouth, wanting to continue his mental assault, but at that moment, Effie suddenly walked over to the sitting reflection, knelt beside it, and put her hand on his shoulder.

Looking into the Castellan's eyes, she then said:

"Hey. You know, I am no stranger to seeking escape in fantasies. In fact, I spent most of my life endlessly imagining wondrous things: being healthy, being strong, being able to move… not being a burden. I spent countless days dreaming about being free. I imagined it so vividly and so often that, at times, I was almost able to believe that it was real."

Effie smiled.

"And then, slowly, it did become real. I was able to make all my fantasies come true, one after another. But imagination is indeed inexhaustible, and so, I imagined new things: I imagined a world where my children would be able to thrive, one that they would not want to escape as desperately as I had wanted to escape mine… I am still working on making this particular fantasy come true. My imagination is my greatest source of inspiration."

She looked at the Castellan and shook her head.

"But what have you, the faithful servant of the Demon of Imagination, done with yours? Thousands of years have passed, but you haven't managed to imagine yourself as anything other than what you were. You imagined nothing… you haven't changed at all. You put your Mistress to shame."

Effie gripped the Castellan's shoulder and said quietly:

"Mirage is gone, and she is never coming back. Now, you have a choice — you can decide what you want to be without her. Will you imagine yourself as someone new, or will you betray her memory by remaining the same? The choice is yours… but I really hope that you will choose the former. I hope that you will help me make my fantasy come true."

She looked at him with an earnest expression, and meeting her gaze, the Castellan seemed to hesitate.

He remained silent for a while, looking into her eyes with a lost, weary expression.

Sunny remained silent and entirely still, afraid to distract the ancient

reflection from making a decision. And he could feel it — Sunny could easily imagine that the Castellan would make the right choice.

But just before he did…

Something glinted in Effie's eyes, and then reflected in his.

A moment later, the Castellan shuddered.

Chapter-2549: Eye of the Beholder

Effie frowned, sensing that something had gone wrong. She let go of the ancient reflection's shoulder and drew her hand back.

"What…"

Sunny just barely had time to grab her and pull her away before the Castellan's body was contorted by a strange convulsion. His glassy eyes opened widely… and then, a vast flood of white mist suddenly exploded from his body in all directions, drowning the vast underground chamber.

Suddenly, Sunny could not see anything except the milky white mist swirling around him like a ghostly ocean. A familiar sense of his very being collapsing into nothingness washed over him for a brief moment, but then, Sunny forcefully asserted his existence and pushed the feeling back.

"Concentrate on your True Name! Will yourself to remember who you are!"

Effie must have done as he told, and her willpower must have been sufficiently firm, because she seemed to regain her bearings just a few moments later.

For a few long moments, nothing seemed to exist in the world except for the ghostly fog and the feelings of the two of them holding each other. All sounds had disappeared, as well, muffled by the white mist.

Sunny looked around, full of dark anticipation.

And then, a disembodied voice resounded in the silence, enveloping them like a tide:

"Ah, what a strange sensation. I've never taken a reflection as a vessel before… it feels so odd. But also oddly fitting."

The voice laughed, full of amusement, but Sunny did not share that feeling. Instead, he was full of wariness.

'Mordret, that bastard…'

It seemed like Mordret had escaped from Morgan and Saint, after all. He had found the right reflection to escape to… he must have traveled to the eyes that had been stolen from the victims of the Nihilist, then reflected from them into Effie's, and finally entered the Castellan's eyes from hers.

And now, he had consumed the Castellan and made the ancient reflection his vessel.

…Things must not have gone well for Mordret, though, both in the battle against Saint and in the soul duel with the reflection of Omer of the Nine. Otherwise, he would not have been talking — he would have already moved to kill Effie and usurp the authority over the Palace of Imagination.

And speaking about that authority…

The ocean of white mist around them stirred suddenly, and then moved, flowing slowly at first, then faster and faster. If Sunny was to hazard a guess, Mordret was probably in the process of absorbing the essence of the Castellan — considering how much of the mist there was, it would probably take him a bit of time.

And when that time ran out…

Sunny decided not to think about it.

Instead, he thought about how to deal with the Prince of Nothing.

Effie moved slightly, reaching for her gun.

"I am guessing we won't be able to shoot him dead, will we?"

Sunny shook his head, and at that moment, the disembodied voice

spoke once more from the white mist, seemingly coming from all directions at the same time.

"What an amusing suggestion, Saint Athena! But I am afraid I will have to disappoint you… to tell you the truth, you could have probably finished my original body off with a mundane bullet at the moment — it is in quite rough shape after getting to know the Child of Nether better, alas. But, luckily, I've managed to secure a new attire just in time."

An ominous note found its way into Mordret's pleasant voice:

"So, am I very curious to see just what this vessel is capable of…"

Sunny remained calm, thinking.

Mordret's new vessel was the body of the Castellan. But the Castellan himself was dead, destroyed in a soul duel… wouldn't that mean that the authority he had usurped belonged to no one at the moment, then?

And since no one was usurping it, wouldn't that authority return to its intended owner?

The Master of the Castle… or rather, it's Mistress.

"Effie…"

He paused for a moment, and then said in an even tone:

"Tell me to regain my power."

The white mist was a raging current now, moving around the vast chamber like a powerful whirlpool. Mordret had to be at the center of that whirlpool, straining to absorb the furious torrent of nothingness that was pouring into his soul.

Effie shifted and looked at him for a split second, confusion clearly written on her face.

Then, her eyes gleamed with understanding.

She smiled faintly.

"Suffering from the lack of potency, huh? Not performing as you used to? Well, Auntie Effie can help with that... you're a Sovereign, partner! Rise and shine!"

And as she spoke those words, Sunny swayed and staggered. If not for Effie supporting him, he might have toppled over.

"Aaahhh…"

Suddenly, he felt his powers returning to him. Effie did not seem to have regained full control over the Palace of Imagination yet, or maybe she was simply unable to wield that authority as intricately as the Castellan had been able to — therefore, her command had failed to completely negate the laws of the illusion established by him fully, even if Mirage City was already falling apart.

But it did negate them to an extent.

Sunny was definitely not a mundane person anymore, and he could sense some facets of his Aspect becoming unsealed. Not enough to give him his full power, by far, but enough to allow his shadow sense to wash over the Castle.

And that was all that he needed.

He had not known it before, but the great tower had collapsed in the furious battle between Saint and Mordret. The roof of the throne room was shattered, and rain was falling on the throne of Mirage. Sunny could sense Saint there, as well as the broken form of Morgan — she was alive, but grievously wounded, being supported by the taciturn Shadow as they moved through the debris.

'Found you.'

As the white mist in the underground chamber became thin, almost allowing him to see the towering shape of the Great Mirror — and the figure of Mordret at the heart of the furious white whirlwind — Sunny reached through the shadows and pulled both Saint and Morgan underground.

A moment later, they appeared on the stone floor beside him.

Morgan staggered and fell, blood flowing from the ghastly wounds on her body. Saint, however, maintained her balance easily.

Sunny forced out a smile, knowing that it was all going to be over for them the moment Mordret finished absorbing the ocean of white mist, and nodded in his direction.

"Go drown him in true darkness. Go!"

True darkness was an enemy of shadows… but it was an enemy of reflections, as well. Because just like shadows, reflections could not exist without light.

Saint lunged forward at terrible speed, not wasting even a split second to question his words. Her eyes blazed with cold crimson flames, and the white mist parted in front of her.

Mordret let out a melodious laugh.

"How cunning, Lord of Shadows. Ah, but it is too late… much too late…"

A tidal wave of true darkness escaped from Saint's body, crashing into the white whirwind. It washed over him before he could even finish the sentence.

Effie knelt near Morgan to check her wounds, then looked at Sunny.

"Do you think Saint will be able to destroy his vessel?"

Sunny lingered with the answer for a moment.

Then, he shook his head.

"No. If she could, he would not have stayed still to meet her attack."

But she would be able to buy them some time.

Effie whispered something to Morgan, and her bleeding seemed to slow down. She must have regained some of her powers, as well —

enough of them survive her terrible wounds, at least.

Something collided with a terrible boom under the cover of true darkness, and the underground chamber shook.

Effie cursed.

"So what do we do?!"

Sunny stayed silent for a few long moments, looking into the darkness with a tense expression.

Then, suddenly, he smiled.

"Follow me. I'm going to need your strength."

Instead of joining Saint in the battle against Mordret, he ran into the opposite side — toward the Great Mirror.

That was because he had guessed what form the fragment of Weaver's lineage had taken… was going to take.

Reaching the Great Mirror, he grabbed the black fabric covering it and gestured for Effie to do the same.

"Pull!"

Chapter-2550: Broken Illusion

The Great Mirror was truly enormous, and although the sheet of fabric covering it was thin, it was still incredibly vast and heavy. So, he needed Effie's herculean strength to pull it off the hidden surface.

They pulled as hard as they could, and the fabric moved — slowly at first, and then faster and faster.

It rippled and fell, slowly revealing the silver surface of the Great Mirror…

At that moment, there was another deafening boom, and Saint's body flew out of the pool of true darkness, trailing drops of blood behind it.

Sunny acted before he knew what he was doing, stepping through the shadows to catch her. He slid a few meters back, holding her petite human form in his arms, and then gently put her on the floor.

A suffocating sense of anger rose in his chest.

'I'm... glad that this bastard is nearly immortal. He won't die, so I'll be able to torture him endlessly…'

The white mist was entirely gone now.

To his left, Effie dashed back to escape the vast black shroud of the falling mirror cover. To his right, Morgan slowly rose from the floor, her scarlet eyes burning with a sharp intent.

Right in front of Sunny, some distance away, Mordret slowly walked out of the darkness. He looked around with an easy smile, then swept the Castellan's disheveled hair back and looked at his hands.

"What a curious vessel. Its nature is… almost dangerous, I think. Oh,

but this won't do, won't do at all."

Suddenly, the figure of the Castellan grew blurry and changed, transforming into Mordret's own appearance. Reflections were transient beings, after all, capable of changing into anything facing them — Mordret seemed to have mastered that aspect of his new vessel swiftly.

When he turned to Sunny, his amicable smile suddenly felt dark and sinister.

"Now, where were we? Oh, yes. All of you owe me something, and it's time to collect. Let's start with eliminating the usurper who had stolen Bastion from me…"

He threw a murderous look at Effie and took a step forward.

But then, his expression changed.

The billowing black shroud finally fell to the floor, revealing the vast expanse of the Great Mirror… and what reflected on it.

Sunny looked up, shivering as a pale smile appeared on his lips.

Out there, on the surface of the Great Mirror…

All of them were reflected clearly — Sunny, Effie, Morgan, Saint, and Mordret. But none of it mattered, because there was another reflection trapped in the colossal mirror, cast by nothing.

A dark figure that towered at a hundred meters height, looming above them all like a nebulous deity. It wore a tattered black mantle, standing with its back to the vast underground chamber… but as the black shroud fell, the figure moved slightly and turned, casting its terrifying gaze at the five mortal ants far below.

Its black wooden mask was snarling fiercely, and there was nothing but darkness nestling in its eyes. Three horns rose above its head like a jagged crown…

'Weaver.'

It was a reflection that the Demon of Fate had left in the Great Mirror of the Palace of Imagination thousands of years ago.

As Sunny's eyes gleamed with awe, Effie paled and took a step back. Morgan let out a groan and collapsed to her knees, shutting her eyes and covering them with both hands.

Saint shuddered on the floor.

Mordret remained motionless for a long moment and then slowly turned to face the Great Mirror.

"What… what the hell is this…"

He looked up to behold the reflection of Weaver, and as he did, his face became twisted by an expression of utter terror.

Mordret raised a trembling hand, as if trying to hide himself from the daemon's harrowing gaze…

But he never did.

Because in the next moment, his body simply exploded into a cloud of glass shards, obliterated on the spot by the mere pressure of Weaver's presence.

'H—huh…'

Witnessing a daemon's reflection was already terrible enough. But Mordret had not just seen it… since he possessed a sense that allowed him to perceive reflections, he had no choice but to perceive the reflection of Weaver in all its unfathomable immensity.

And that alone was enough to destroy his vessel, which failed to endure the strain.

The bastard might have even died… although Sunny doubted that very much. Mordret had probably retreated somewhere in terror to hide and lick his wounds.

But Sunny had no time to think about that.

He stared at the reflection of Weaver, entranced, and then took an unconscious step back.

As he did, his own reflection overlapped with the reflection of the Demon of Fate.

And when it did…

The surface of the Great Mirror rippled.

A moment later, only one of the two reflections remained.

Sunny blacked out.

***

A few hours later, Effie and Morgan stood on the wall of the Castle, looking at the turbulent waters of the lake beyond. The rain had finally stopped, and the sky cleared… not that it brought them any relief.

Mirage City was gone, and the sky itself was cracked, slowly crumbling as the ancient illusion crumbled.

The world seemed to be ending...

But the silver moon was still slowly rising into the shattered sky.

"At this speed, this entire place will cease to exist in a few days."

Morgan turned slightly when she spoke, then nodded.

"...What kind of illusion will you create in its place?"

Effie lingered for a while.

"I am not sure. Something to prepare Awakened for challenging Nightmares, I think? Or for waging large-scale wars against the Nightmare Creatures. We will have to wait and see… I don't think it will be as elaborate as Mirage City, though. After all, I am not a reflection of a genius storyteller that had existed for thousands of years."

Morgan nodded again, then looked to the side.

There, the body of the Lord of Shadows was sprawled on the battlements, with Saint standing guard above it. She frowned.

"Why is he still unconscious? And what actually happened there, in front of the Great Mirror?"

Effie looked at Sunny, too, then shrugged.

"Well. He seems to have gobbled up a reflection of the Demon of Fate. Just another Tuesday for him, surely… don't worry, though, he'll come around eventually. That guy won't be brought down by something as frivolous as a sinister daemon."

Morgan stared at her incredulously for a while, then sighed.

"Well, if you say so… not that I care too much. Anyway, our ticket out of here has arrived."

She pointed to the lake in front of them, with dark edifices of drowned buildings rising from it like grave stones.

Out there, on the dark surface of the still water, the reflection of the moon was shining with pale silver light.

Effie grimaced.

"So we are swimming again."

She shook her head dejectedly, then took off her shoes and looked at taciturn Shadow.

"Saint… you do not look so good. Let me carry him."

Saint seemed to be struggling, indeed. It was not because of the wounds she had received in the battle with Mordret — rather, it was because of the strain of forcefully suppressing her evolution to remain by her master's side.

Still, instead of letting Effie carry Sunny, she silently leaned down and picked up his unconscious body herself.

Effie smiled.

"Well, alright. In that case…"

With that, she climbed onto the parapet of the castle wall and looked at the distant reflection of the moon.

"Let's go home."

***

Somewhere in the Eastern Quadrant, a convoy carrying the refugees to a port city was scattered across the desolate wasteland, with many vehicles overturned or letting out pillars of smoke.

If they had only made it to their destination, they would have been safe. Out there in the waters near the city, the Night Garden was resting on the waves, and everything in its sphere of influence was safe from the horrifying threat of the Skinwalker… for now, at least.

Soon, Soul Reaper and her colossal ship would have to return to the Dream Realm to replenish the Great Citadel's reserves of essence.

But the convoy had not made it to the destination. Instead, it was ambushed by the vessels of the abomination, and was now nearly destroyed.

People said that the Skinwalker was on the verge of an evolution… perhaps they were to become the last sacrifice to fuel its descent into the status of a profane deity.

The survivors had retreated to the head vehicles, desperately trying to fight the vessels of the Skinwalker off. But it was hopeless — they were already surrounded, and the abomination had already taken several of their most powerful warriors.

Now, those warriors were a part of the Skinwalker, helping the other vessels break the resistance of the last group.

"Stay strong! Don't let them get close! Don't let them touch you!"

An Ascended officer tried to rally his soldiers, but in the next

moment, an arrow pierced his enchanted armor. The Skinwalker had been learning to use human weapons as of late, which only made it more deadly. But now, the vessels of the eerie abominations showed more coordination and discipline than seasoned human troops, washing over the continent like an unstoppable plague.

The Ascended let out a groan and fell to one knee, looking up to see the vessels of the Skinwalker closing in on the group of refugees from all sides.

One of them was already right in front of him.

The creature looked like a human… and had been human once… but now, it was impossible to mistake it for a person. Its gaze was too alien now that it had cast away pretenses, too eerie, too dreadful.

The Ascended bit his lip and prepared to end his own life. It was better than becoming one of these creatures, at least.

But then, something strange happened.

The vessel of the Skinwalker flinched, and then shuddered, bending down in a violent contortion. It trembled for a moment or two, then grew still.

Something similar was happening to the other vessels, as well, spreading among them like a strange infection.

"W—what…"

Gritting his teeth, the Ascended picked up his sword and staggered back to his feet, preparing to make his last stand.

Then, the vessel of the Skinwalker in front of him straightened and looked around with an aloof expression.

Finally glancing back at the Ascended, it lingered for a moment, and then offered him a friendly smile.

"Ah… the weather is wonderful today, isn't it? What a day to be alive."

The stranger chuckled as the rest of the Skinwalker vessels around them fell to the ground, then slowly rose again, all wearing the same smile.

"Off you go, then. Do not fret — I will take it from here. There is nothing to worry about…"

[End of Part II: Mirage City Noir.]

Chapter-2551: Fragments of a Broken Soul

A vast and somber expanse of white mist sprawled beneath a bleak stormy sky. The surging storm clouds were heavy with rain, ready to explode with thunder and lightning; the sea of white mist was restless, flowing on the currents of ghostly winds.

A pale light was suffusing the clouds and pouring onto the misty sea below. There, in the tempestuous sky, seven radiant spheres were shining like suns, their cold rays falling through the tears in the veil of the storm.

It seemed as though vague symbols were carved into the surface of the pale suns, hiding beneath it like shadows.

A man was sitting on the surface of the sea, surrounded by mist, looking up at the silent tempest. The surging clouds, the rays of pale light, and the seven radiant spheres reflected in his eyes as if in a mirror. His gaze was solemn, and his expression was distant.

He was Mordret… the fragment of Mordret who had spent most of his life in the Palace of Imagination, living among people who he knew were no different from illusions, in a world that he knew was a mirage.

Now, even that mirage had been taken from him, and he found himself imprisoned here — in the hidden heart of his twin brother's Mirror Realm.

Looking at the raging clouds, he sighed.

This Mirror Realm was vast and nebulous, reflecting the tumultuous world back upon itself. However, its very heart — the place he was inhabiting — was different. It was hidden deeper and defended

better, isolated, like a fortified inner keep behind the walls of a great fortress. It did not reflect the world… instead, it was a reflection of his brother's Soul Sea.

There was a living space set up for him here. It was sparse and pragmatic, but also not without a note of fancy. His brother must have collected various items and amenities in preparation for their eventual reunion in the span of many years — some of them were opulent and luxurious, worthy of belonging to a member of the most affluent Legacy clan, some would fit a mundane soldier better.

There was a modest manor with a tastefully decorated back garden standing in the mist. There was a massive military APC and camp kitchen set up in the mist nearby, as well as several alloy water tanks. There was a vast library full of books, writing and calligraphy utensils, elegant tea sets, and a large storage of varied food supplies.

There were paths to take walks, with various curios placed in the mist along them — rock formations, sculptures and relics found in remote regions of the Dream Realm, strange machines and mundane artifacts from Earth, towering carcasses of fantastical Nightmare Creatures his brother must have slain…

And much more. Mordret was discovering new things every day.

It was a bit of a letdown compared to his previous lifestyle, but he was comfortable.

If a little lonesome... for now.

After all, his brother did not have time to visit at the moment.

The raging clouds, the restless currents in the sea of mist, the powerful winds that blew across the vast expanse of the Mirror Realm, as if trying to tear it apart — it was not how things were supposed to be.

Instead, it was a sign that his brother's soul was under assault. He was at war, fighting for his life. Even the innermost part of his Mirror Realm was in a tumultuous state, its walls trembling, so there was no saying what kind of fury and devastation was reigning outside.

As Mordret looked up, subtle cracks appeared on the surface of one of the seven suns. Malignant tendrils or revolting darkness spread in those cracks, marring the radiant surface of the sphere and consuming it from the inside like a tumor. Before too long, the light of the Soul Core dimmed, and it came to resemble an appalling, diseased star that seeped grotesque black tears.

A moment later, the Soul Core shattered like glass. A rift opened in the sky, and its shards were forcefully expelled, taking the mass of spreading darkness with them.

The winds howled, and the mist surged. A twisting white pillar ascended into the sky, connecting the vast sea with the furious tempest above like a twisting tornado. As more mist poured into the clouds, a new, pristine Soul Core was slowly formed to replace the shattered one.

That was a reflection of his brother's soul becoming infected with Corruption. He had torn one of his Soul Cores out, callously mutilating himself, to prevent the Corruption from spreading — then, using the vast reservoir of power he had absorbed after slaying the Castellan, he created a new one.

This way, the Prince of Nothing saved himself.

But it was of little use.

Because before too long, a different Soul Core dimmed, rotting with vile darkness. That one was shattered and expelled, as well, and a new one eventually took its place. The somber expanse of his Soul Sea reeled, the white mist surging under the assault of cold winds.

This was not the first or second time Mordret had observed the dreadful spectacle transpiring in the sky above him… and it wasn't going to be the last.

This battle had been going on for days.

For now, his brother was managing to balance the price of continuously sacrificing parts of his soul to carve out Corruption, but how long would it last? He had gained a great deal after absorbing

the essence of the Castellan, but that stolen boon was not endless. The sea of mist was overflowing for now… but it already seemed thinner than it had been before.

What would happen when it vanished entirely, revealing the still water beneath? What would happen when Mordret saw a flawless reflection of the tempest above on the placid surface of his brother's Soul Sea?

What would happen when even the storm clouds vanished?

He was worried. He was restless. He wanted to help…

But what could he do?

Mordret was merely an Awakened, after all. Even then, he had lived most of his life as a mundane human. The scope and terror of the battle happening outside the walls of his comfortable shelter was far beyond his ability to comprehend, let alone affect.

He was of no use to his brother... to anyone.

Taking a deep breath, Mordret finally looked down.

Then, he closed his eyes and concentrated, a resolute expression appearing on his face.

Nothing happened for a long while…

And then, a tiny tendril of white fog slowly rose from the surface of the misty sea, being drawn to him by some invisible force. Some time later, there was another.

Soon enough, dozens of thin streams of white mist surrounded him, being slowly absorbed into his body.

Mordret was not at all as capable as his powerful, dreadful brother... but at the core of their being, they were the same person.

So, he could become someone capable, as well.

Chapter-2552: King of Nothing

The Eastern Quadrant had been one of the four great strongholds of humanity once. It was perhaps not as large and populous as the Northern Quadrant, but hundreds of millions of people still called it home...

Now, mere years after Antarctica had fallen, Australia itself was on the verge of being consumed by the powers of Corruption.

The difference between the two was that while the Southern Quadrant had fallen to an endless tide of monsters birthed by the Chain of Nightmares, the Eastern Quadrant was being devoured by a single, insidious abomination.

The Great Terror, Skinwalker.

Of all the horrors brought to Earth by the Nightmare Spell, this one was perhaps the most dreadful — not because it was the most powerful, but simply because it could mimic human behavior almost flawlessly and blend in with mundane people without raising any suspicion.

And even worse than that, the Skinwalker had shown a frightening ability to learn and adapt with terrible speed.

Its first appearance had gone unnoticed, and by the time the powers watching over humanity learned of its existence, it was already too late. The Skinwalker had infected many cities in the Eastern Quadrant, embedding its vessels among the mundane population, the Awakened warriors, the government forces, and even the private armies of the local Legacy clans.

There were few of these vessels, at first — maybe because the abomination was biding its time and learning the ways of humanity before starting to spread like a plague. Some of them were eventually

hunted down and destroyed… but not all of them. Even if the Sovereigns reigned supreme, they could not fight a Nightmare Creature that they could not find.

And their forces had been pulled away to fight an internal war, regardless.

By the time the original Sovereigns had fallen and Changing Star of the Immortal Flame took the throne of mankind, it was already too late. Humanity managed to prevent the Skinwalker from spreading to other Quadrants or consuming the human settlements in the Dream Realm, but the sinister fiend became too deeply rooted in Australia.

A single settlement fell first, all of its citizens becoming vessels of the eerie abomination. Then, another one, and then another one still. Before too long, the whole Quadrant had been washed over by the spreading plague, and a full-scale war against the Skinwalker started in earnest.

That war was not going well for the humans. The Eastern Quadrant Siege Capital still stood, and they still controlled most of the coastal area facing the Indian Ocean. However, the inner expanse of the continent and its southern reaches were fully conquered by the Skinwalker. And almost every day, the Great Terror took more lives, gained more vessels, and conquered more land.

The spread of the abominable plague seemed unstoppable. The humans were slowly retreating toward EQSC, losing one city after another — in fact, they had not been routed entirely only because Changing Star herself took to the battlefield as often as the laws governing the waking world allowed her, pushing the Skinwalker back from time to time.

But even with her support and with the best Saints of humanity joining the war effort, the abomination continued to spread. Eventually, it became clear that the continent could not be saved — so, a grievous decision to evacuate it was made, and the Dream Gate opened in the heart of EQSC to take the refugees away, the naval convoys arriving to ferry them north.

The arrival of Soul Reaper Jet and the Night Garden helped stabilize

the situation. A fragile balance was achieved in the Eastern Quadrant… for a short while.

The Skinwalker had taken millions upon millions upon millions of vessels by then. Among them were millions of humans, both mundane and Awakened… but there were millions of lesser Nightmare Creatures from the wild reaches of the continent, as well.

No one really knew how many vessels the abomination possessed now, and even if someone did, there was no way to defend the vast expanse of the continent from that terrible, ever-growing force.

And worst of all…

Both the academics and the diviners in the service of the Human Domain were unanimous in their suspicion that the Skinwalker was on the verge of evolving — either to the Cursed Rank or to the Titan Class… or maybe both.

If it did, neither Soul Reaper nor the Night Garden would be able to hold it back anymore, and the entire population of the Eastern Quadrant, including the military forces of humanity concentrated there, would be consumed without having time or opportunity to evacuate.

The situation was dire…

And it was in that dire crisis that something strange began to happen.

There were isolated reports at first, then a wave of them, all saying the same things — that the Skinwalker was behaving strangely.

As if something was attacking the dreadful abomination from within, fighting for control of its vessels.

...That something was Mordret, the Prince of Nothing — the banished son of the King of Swords, the traitor to the fallen Clan Valor, and the executioner of the House of Night.

Mordret had gained a lot in the Palace of Imagination, even if he lost a powerful new vessel of his own at the very end. He managed to retrieve his only weakness and escape the wrath of the Lord of

Shadow relatively unscathed. However, that was not enough… not nearly enough, considering what was coming and how little time he had left to prepare for the approaching calamity.

So, he decided to play one last, desperate gambit — something for which he had been preparing for a long time.

He, who was nearly immortal, put his life on the line and left himself no way out but success.

Mordret challenged the Great Terror to a soul duel.

There, in the dreadful darkness of the Skinwalker's profane soul, surrounded by the unfathomable expanse of Corruption, Mordret fought the eldritch abomination tooth and nail, not holding anything back. His own soul was mangled and poisoned, but he tore pieces of it out and continued to fight.

And in the process, he did something else.

His own daring, impossible act of defiance.

Ever since becoming a Saint, Mordret had been struggling to maintain his sense of self. Unwilling to become a demented and broken thing like the Soul Stealer, he limited the use of his Transcendent Ability to only separating himself to inhabit a handful of vessels — a dozen or two, at most.

Now, he abandoned all caution.

Mordret needed to splinter a fragment of his soul to create an independent incarnation, so now, he shattered himself into a million pieces. He, who had always dreamed of becoming whole again, tore himself apart completely — that was the only way for him to defeat the Skinwalker. Because with each vessel Mordret stole from him, the power of the eerie fiend lessened a little.

In a sense, trying to keep his shattered self from crumbling was as difficult as battling the Great Terror… no, maybe more so.

That was the limit he had to overcome.

Mordret's and the Skinwalker's horrid, relentless, unseen battle lasted for a long while. Hours turned into days, and days turned into weeks. Each of his soul cores had been destroyed and reforged anew many times. The pool of power he had absorbed in Mirage City slowly exhausted itself, and then ran dry completely.

That was when Mordret finally broke through his limit.

He destroyed the Skinwalker and took over all of its vessels — millions of human vessels, and millions of Nightmare Creatures.

And somewhere along the way…

Mordret became the seventh Sovereign born from humanity, and the third one to attain Supremacy without the help of the Nightmare Spell.

However, his Domain was unlike those of the other six.

That was because Mordret had no Citadels, no territories, and no subjects. His reign was not founded on anything, and he ruled nothing… only himself.

With his millions of vessels, Mordret was like a nation in and of himself — self-sufficient and self-reliant, depending on nobody, beholden to nothing.

With no weaknesses the Dreamspawn could exploit.

As the sun rose above the devastated Eastern Quadrant, the world welcomed a new Sovereign. Of course, his emergence caused a great stir among other powers governing the dying world — now, unexpectedly, they needed to decide how to deal with the new king.

The King of Nothing.

Chapter-2553: A Monster With Ten Thousand Heads

The graceful silhouette of the Ivory Island drifted among the clouds above Bastion. Contoured against the golden sun, it looked both beautiful and peaceful from the ground… however, the atmosphere within the walls of the Tower of Hope was far from tranquil.

In fact, it was tense and somber despite the suffocating power of the five people gathered in a spacious council room on one of the great pagoda's seven floors.

Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, Effie, and Kai were seated around a table, wearing grim expressions. Cassie was talking, and the more she said, the heavier the mood in the room became.

Sunny heard each word clearly and grasped their meaning flawlessly.

At the same time…

He found himself getting distracted as his newly altered mind spread far and wide, absorbing thousands of different perspectives with the same degree of focused clarity.

It was a strange state of being, and one he was still failing to get used to.

The reason for his current state was, of course, the fragment of Weaver's lineage he had collected in the Palace of Imagination…

Mind Weave.

'No wonder I was out cold for so long.'

The four previous fragments had put him out of commission for a

short while and caused him indescribable agony. Absorbing and assimilating them had been a torment — but the Mind Weave was different.

Perhaps it was because it had altered his mind on a fundamental level, or perhaps it was because the suffering had been too great to endure even for someone as used to pain as Sunny, but he simply passed out as soon as Weaver's terrible reflection fused with his own. So, he did not remember experiencing any pain at all.

That was a wonderful boon, without a doubt… however, Sunny had remained unconscious for two weeks as a result.

The chaos his absence had caused was significant. The conquest campaign in the Burned Forest had almost collapsed, the restoration of the Dark City had fallen behind schedule, and the countless projects he had been busy with had stalled. Nothing he couldn't salvage had transpired, luckily, but there was plenty of catching up he had to do.

If there was one silver lining that had come out of this mess, though…

It was that Nephis seemed to have thawed after their recent spat. In fact, she was more attentive to him now than she had been before, albeit in a subtle way… which secretly pleased Sunny a great deal.

The body of a Sovereign was enormously enduring, meaning that a few weeks of coma were not going to harm it in any way — so, Nephis had not really nursed him back to health. But staying by his unconscious body for many days, not knowing when his condition would improve, must have rattled her quite a lot, or at least forced her to put things into perspective.

No, not even an unconscious body… with Sunny out cold, his incarnations were released and reverted back to being independent shadows. That must have been even more difficult for Nephis to endure.

As a result, the distance between them disappeared, almost making it seem like there was no disagreement between them.

Almost…

Sunny sighed slightly.

In any case, he did come back to his senses eventually. And when he did, the world was quite different from how it had been before — or at least Sunny perceived it differently from how he had before.

The difference was so startling, in fact, that he had spent a few more days entirely disoriented.

It was difficult to describe the tectonic shift that had happened to him with words. Mind Weave… did not exactly make him smarter, wiser, or more intelligent. However, it did increase the volume of his mind immensely, making it seem almost limitless.

Sunny was not unfamiliar with this trait, since he had achieved something of the sort himself over the years. First learning to perceive and process the world from both his own point of view and that of his shadow, then slowly expanding the scope of his mind to encompass all of his incarnations while at the same time learning to cope with the increasing reach of his shadow sense.

Later still, his mind expanded even more, adapting to receive sensory input from all the shades of the Shadow Legion and every member of the Shadow Clan. Sunny had always perceived what transpired around them passively… most of the conduits of his perception simply blended into the background, but he could bring dozens of them to the forefront at will — even hundreds, if he really tried.

He had thought that to be quite an accomplishment at the time. Now that he had Mind Weave, though, he felt that his previous achievements were merely child's play.

As soon as Sunny regained consciousness, he had been assaulted by a crushing avalanche of sensations. The strangest thing, however… was that he had not felt crushed. Instead, he was suddenly able to clearly perceive and concentrate on each of these sensations, as if he was a mythical monster with ten thousand heads and ten thousand arms.

Or would that be twenty thousand arms?

In any case, Sunny had been quite startled.

And ever since, he often found himself getting distracted — but also not distracted at all. It was not that he could not concentrate on something while concentrating on a thousand other things at the same time, it was just that he… he sometimes failed to put meaning into any one point of view while simultaneously perceiving countless others with the same intensity.

His mind was drifting.

'Was this how gods felt, I wonder?'

Only on a much, much vaster scale.

There were benefits to having a mind spacious enough to encompass limitless inputs, of course.

Sunny's control over the Shadow Legion had increased tremendously, for example. His ability to envision and execute impossibly complex and intricate patterns while weaving had taken an enormous leap, as well — so much so that it felt like he had been crippled before, and was only now experiencing weaving as it was meant to be.

He could pay much more attention to each member of the Shadow Clan, too…

But, still, Sunny was somewhat uneasy.

He was having a bit of trouble maintaining his former way of thinking in this new, startling reality… and he was not sure that he was meant to. Sunny felt more distant from the mortal man he had once been now, and that feeling slowly grew. But wasn't that exactly what Eurys had told him had to transpire as one approached Apotheosis?

Talking to Nephis and especially Cassie had helped him, somewhat. Both of them were experiencing their own version of that strange process, albeit not quite on the same scale — Nephis because of her Domain and the Sun God's lineage, Cassie because of her Aspect and Attributes.

But it was still a big adjustment to make.

Oh, and he had been quite busy ever since regaining consciousness, putting Mind Weave to the test...

"Sunny?"

He remained motionless for a few moments, then raised his head and looked at Cassie.

"Yes, I am listening."

She lingered a little, then nodded.

"As I was saying, the investigation into the Church of the Moon has produced quite concerning results. Let me share the report…"

Chapter-2554: Infohazard

Sunny had been able to sense what his other incarnations were doing in Mirage City. Similarly, his other incarnations had been spectators of his strange adventure — therefore, the information shared by Mordret reached Nephis and Cassie almost immediately after he himself received it.

The news of a supposedly immediate threat posed by Asterion was not a great shock, even if they had to reevaluate how dangerous he truly was. In truth, both Sunny and Nephis had a feeling that they would have to confront the third Sovereign sooner or later, so they had taken steps to prepare for his eventual emergence.

Mordret's warning came mere days before their own network caught the traces of the Dreamspawn — in fact, if not for the chaos caused by the winter solstice, they would have received the report containing the first clues even earlier. But now that they knew what they were looking for, the investigation had been accelerated.

The members of the Shadow Clan, although few in numbers, were spread all across both the waking world and the Dream Realm. Similarly, Cassie had her own network of informants — some of them voluntary, some unknowing — and kept an eye out for anything strange.

The first strange thing that had led to concerning results was one of the many spreading cults, the Church of the Moon.

"The cult started quite innocuously. Its members are in the habit of joining merchant caravans and offering blessings for safe travel… blessings of the Moon. Not Beast God, though — simply the Moon. What is strange about the Church of the Moon, however, is the speed with which its following grew."

Cassie paused for a moment and gestured to a paper report compiled

by Aiko.

"People of the Nightmare Spell era are usually not easily led astray by superstitions, even harmless ones. But the followers of the Moon gained recognition both swiftly and widely. It is still quite a minor sect, all things considered, but there lies the problem."

She frowned.

"After noticing the suspicious pattern, we used the government personnel to run an analysis on the other minor cults in the database. The results are… quite worrying, to say the least. There are at least half a dozen similar sects spread around the world… they are in each of the three Quadrants, the basin of the River of Tears, as well as the former territory of the Sword Domain. And these are only the religious cults."

Cassie's expression darkened.

"There might be other unassuming groups loitering on the edges of society — criminal gangs, private clubs, black market enterprises, and so on. At the moment, there is no way to tell how many people exactly are… let's call them sleeper agents, for now."

Kai, who had been listening to her quietly, asked in a somber tone:

"How have we not noticed them before? And… even if they are indeed secret followers of that man, the Dreamspawn, what does that entail exactly? What do they do? What has raised our suspicion, apart from an abnormal rate of growth?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"That is the question, isn't it?"

Cassie let out a sigh.

"The second question answers the first. What do they do? Ostensibly, nothing of any importance. That is why we have not discovered anything suspicious about them sooner."

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"If they have done nothing wrong, how do we know that they serve our favorite scarecrow, Mr. Lunatic?"

Cassie lingered for a few moments.

"I said that they have done nothing of importance, not that they have done nothing. From the outside, their activity seems quite benign, if a little misguided — offering blessings, giving troubled people a sense of community, and holding sermons from time to time. However, once we dug deeper…"

She paused, then sighed again.

"Well, really, we still did not find anything sinister. At most, some members of these sects are guilty of minor vandalism… our agents could not discover more, because they do not know what they are looking for. But when I took a look personally and concentrated on the areas where the members of these cults are active, I saw something eerie."

Cassie paused, then continued in a grim tone:

"Those minor acts of vandalism were mainly things like painting graffiti on the walls of various buildings. And those graffiti all contain the name I am not going to say aloud — the name of the Dreamspawn."

Effie looked at her, then at Nephis and Sunny.

"Do their paintings possess some kind of beguiling power? Are they using runic sorcery, perhaps?"

Cassie shook her head.

"The graffiti possess no power. They are just mundane drawings. The name itself, however… the name itself does."

Kai frowned.

"What kind of power can a name possess?"

He paused for a moment and then added in an embarrassed tone:

"I am sorry, I misspoke. Names obviously possess power — there are True Names and Shaping, after all. But I don't think you meant that kind of power, Cassie. So… what can the Dreamspawn's name do?"

Cassie remained silent for a while, then said with a subdued expression:

"It has the power to spread."

She lowered her head and exhaled slowly.

"Once someone learns that name, it seems to take root in their mind. Then, they start mentioning it from time to time without even realizing. And while that in and of itself does not seem too worrisome, the frightening part is that the name spreads like a virus. Anyone who hears it becomes a carrier, as well — and therefore, helps it spread further."

Her expression turned grim.

"We caught it early enough, so the virus has not spread too widely yet. This is the good news."

She did not seem too happy, though.

Cassie lingered for a few moments, then added evenly:

"The bad news is that there are no countermeasures. We can destroy the graffiti, but the Dreamspawn's name has already been seen or heard by countless people — and we can't destroy people. Or rather, we won't. There is no way to identify all of the hosts, anyway."

Nephis nodded silently. Cassie turned her way briefly, then said:

"More than that, although I compared the Dreamspawn's name to a virus, it is not… not in the traditional sense. It is an idea — an idea that acts as a virulent virus. And therefore, there is no cure that we can come up with, no vaccine, no easily reproduced way to treat the infected."

She fell silent for a few moments, then sighed heavily.

"So, even though we caught it early, there is no way to stop it. The rate with which it spreads will grow exponentially."

Cassie faced them then, and said in a grave tone:

"...It's a pandemic."

Chapter-2555: Nameless Menace

A heavy silence settled in the council room. No one spoke for a while, considering her ominous words. Eventually, Effie leaned back and rubbed her temple.

"How troublesome."

She sighed.

"What about us? We all know his name — are we infected, as well?"

Cassie shrugged.

"It is difficult to tell. From what I have been able to observe so far, not everyone is susceptible to his influence equally. The more powerful a person is and the more mental fortitude they possess, the less frequently they mention the name — which can be seen as them resisting infection. However, there is a difference between resistance and immunity. We also don't know if they are resisting the infection itself, or merely a symptom."

Effe grimaced, dissatisfied with the answer.

"And that's the problem, isn't it? We just don't know enough — we hardly know anything, really. Ki Song and Anvil were too thorough in eradicating any and all knowledge about As… about the Dreamspawn from the world. Hell…"

She looked around the room and said in a somber tone:

"We don't even know why his name being known to people is dangerous. Does the Dreamspawn draw power from those who are infected by the idea of him? Is he rebuilding a foundation of his Domain that way? What happens when the virus reaches critical mass?"

Effie shook her head.

"How are we supposed to fight an enemy we know close to nothing about?"

After another bout of heavy silence, Kai spoke in a hesitant tone:

"Still… how dangerous can that man be? Sure, he is a Supreme inheritor of a divine lineage — maybe even several of them, if Mordret is to be believed. But he is not a wielder of a Divine Aspect, unlike Nephis and Sunny. More than that, he has been sealed on the Moon for two decades. It is already a miracle that he has survived for that long, so how powerful can he still be?"

Even though the question was not directed at Sunny, and his Flaw did not force him to answer, he still responded:

"Let's not get careless. It does not matter how powerful we are — power is merely a weapon. And just like a weapon, it won't save you unless drawn and pointed at the enemy."

Truthfully, Sunny did not think that Asterion could contend against him and Nephis in terms of power — either of them, let alone the two of them together.

However, raw power was not a universal answer.

One had to express the power they possessed shrewdly to make use of it — even then, one moment of complacency could spell disaster. And further still, there was always someone or something that countered your Aspect in the vast and dreadful world of the Nightmare Spell — a bad match-up could bring down even the strongest beings, Awakened and Nightmare Creatures both.

Sunny knew all this better than most because he had triumphed over countless foes who were far more powerful than he and should have utterly crushed him.

So, he was not going to underestimate Asterion.

Especially not after seeing how spooked Mordret was by his former… caretaker. Calling the Dreamspawn his guardian would have probably

been too big a stretch.

Sadly, that did not change much in the current situation.

Effie frowned.

"So what now? What can we even do?"

Cassie remained silent for a while, then said:

"One option is to do what the Ki Song and Anvil did. Find a way to identify everyone infected by the Dreamspawn… then cull them all. Naturally, that would be a slaughter of horrifying proportions."

Nephis shook her head.

"No."

She looked at them and said in her even, dispassionate voice:

"We are not going to slaughter thousands, or maybe even hundreds of thousands of innocent people. If we do, we would be no better than Song and Valor. What was the point of overthrowing them, then?"

Sunny studied her silently.

Behind Neph's calm facade, she was actually a person burning with passion — more than anyone he knew, perhaps. Nephis wanted to conquer all Nightmares and destroy the Nightmare Spell with a passion so fierce that it bordered on obsession… so, it was easy to overlook the rest of her behind that blazing ambition.

But Nephis herself was never blinded by her incinerating desire. Even though she was pursuing it with obsessive persistence, for her, the end never justified the means. Sunny had learned it many years ago, near the crumbling Gateway of the Crimson Spire — that Nephis did not simply want to destroy the Spell, but also did it in a way that she considered right, without compromising her values.

It was just that her personal sense of right and wrong was so strange that most people often failed to recognize her intentions.

Sunny knew, though.

So, he knew that Nephis would never order a massacre of thousands of innocent people to prevent her enemy from growing stronger. She might send them into a bloody battle against a tide of Nightmare Creatures, since that would fit her understanding of what was right and righteous, but she would not simply sacrifice them to further her goals.

That conviction was what made her so strong… but it was also something she lacked when compared to Anvil and Ki Song. A limitation that, if exploited, could be turned into a weakness.

'Was that what Mordret meant when he said that we have too much to lose?'

Sunny was troubled.

"The Dreamspawn has not even revealed himself yet, and it already feels like our hands are tied."

Nephis looked at him briefly, then sighed.

"There are still initial steps we can take. To learn more, and hopefully work out countermeasures based on that information."

She remained silent for a while, contemplating, and then turned to Cassie.

"Cassie, continue to monitor the zealots and broaden the scope of the investigation to include other marginal groups. Request as much resources as you must — conscript the entire intelligence arm of the government, if need be. Additionally… I need you to pay a visit to Godgrave and have a conversation with the disgraced patriarch of the Dagonet clan, Saint Jest."

Sunny nodded quietly.

Old Jest had outlived his king and was now living in exile, confined to a remote Citadel in Godgrave with the other staunch loyalists. If anyone knew about Asterion, it would be him — after all, he had been the most loyal enforcer of the Great Clan Valor. He would have

certainly learned a lot about the members of his young master's cohort.

Whether Jest would be willing to talk was a question, of course. But Sunny had no doubt that Cassie would succeed in getting valuable information out of him. She could be quite persuasive when she wanted to, after all… and if that did not work, she could simply plunder other people's memories.

Nephis turned to Kai.

"Morgan is back in Ravenheart, isn't she? Speak to her as well. Anvil had probably been wary of exposing her to knowledge about the Dreamspawn, considering how dangerous it is, so she would not know as much as Jest… but she can still know something. She also unearthed a part of the secrets left behind by Ki Song — Seishan, too. Learn all you can from them."

A strange shadow ran across her face.

She lingered for a while, and then looked back at Cassie.

"Oh… and get me the casualties list among our Awakened warriors — everyone who fell in battle ever since the war."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What's that for?"

Nephis remained silent for a while. Her face did not show any emotion, but he could tell that she was troubled by something.

Eventually, she said:

"All of humanity — most of it, at least — is encompassed by my Domain. I can feel the longing of billions of people day and night, washing over me like an ocean tide. Sometimes… too often to count… I can vaguely feel their brilliant sparks being extinguished. That means that one of my subjects died. The flame of their desire is gone forever."

Her expression grew a little wistful.

"...I've been sensing more and more people dying as of late. The increase in the mortality rate was not significant, so I assumed that it was just the natural course of things — after all, war is raging on all sides. A war to subjugate new regions of the Dream Realm, a war for the Eastern Quadrant… many people have become refugees and settlers, too, and their lives are far less stable than before."

Nephis frowned.

"But now, I think that there might be a different cause. So, I want to check."

Kai looked at her in confusion.

"A different cause? You suspect that the Dreamspawn's followers are responsible for these deaths?"

Nephis slowly shook her head.

"No. I suspect that these people — some of them, at least... might not be dead at all. There is another reason for me to lose the ability to sense someone's spark, after all. It is if they have ceased to be a part of my Domain."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Meaning… that they became a part of someone else's Domain.'

Like the members of the Shadow Clan, who could not enjoy the grace of Neph's flame due to bearing his mark.

He scowled.

"Do you mean…"

But before Sunny could finish the sentence, Cassie suddenly flinched. Her eyes widened a little, and she turned to them with a complicated expression.

"Wait. There is… there is a message from Jet."

Cassie paused for a moment, and then said in an urgent tone:

"Something strange just happened in the Eastern Quadrant…"

Chapter-2556: The Sovereigns

A desolate wasteland was basking in the blinding light of high noon. The sun was like a small silver coin in the azure sky, melting as its rays bathed the world in heat and radiance. The shadows were small and formless, hiding under the rocks and rusting carcasses of ancient war machines.

Three colossal Gates towered above the wasteland, facing each other. Each formed an apex of a triangle, and there was considerable distance between them.

One of the Dream Gates was dark and nebulous, tearing the world like an inky-black rift. The second one was pure and radiant, shining like the sun. The last one was like a mirror, reflecting the wasteland back upon itself.

No one was here, in the ravaged heart of the Eastern Quadrant, to witness them — no one except for the millions of figures who stood still under the cruel rays of the blazing sun, covering the wasteland behind the Mirror Gate like a vast sea. Some of them looked like humans, while some looked like Nightmare Creatures… of course, all of them were a single being.

Mordret, the King of Nothing.

As the sun moved across the azure expanse of the boundless sky, the shadows slowly crawled out of their shelters. The darkness of the Shadow Gate seemed to flow forward, too — then, it surged and swelled, and a tenebrous legion rose from its lightless depths.

Tens of thousands of shades marched onto the wasteland, with several titanic figures lumbering among them like dark giants. The Shadow Legion assembled into a flawless battle formation, facing the King of Nothing and his myriad vessels silently.

Finally, a sole figure appeared from the Sun Gate, landing on the ground in front of it like a radiant spirit of pure light. Her beautiful wings folded, and her brilliance dimmed, revealing ivory skin and hair that was like a torrent of liquid silver. Regarding the sea of vessels with an aloof expression, she took a step forward and walked to the center of the triangle formed by the three Dream Gates.

Of course, she was Nephis of Immortal Flame, Changing Star — the ruler of the Human Domain and the guiding star of humanity.

Almost at the same time, a figure rose from the shadow of the second gate. It was a young man with porcelain skin and raven-black hair, with eyes so dark that they almost seemed like two glistening onyx gemstones. He was Sunless, the Lord of Shadows — the Sovereign of Death. He headed to the center of the triangle as well, and everywhere he passed, the shadows seemed to grow deeper.

And finally, a third figure appeared out of the rippling silver surface of the Mirror Gate. It was a tall man with a slender figure and strange eyes that reflected the world back upon itself, wearing the tattered remains of a stylish viridian suit. Smiling easily, he folded his hands behind his back and went to meet the other two Sovereigns.

He was Mordret of Nowhere, the King of Nothing.

Slightly past noon, the three demigods met on the scorched sands of the barren wasteland in the Eastern Quadrant.

Sunny was the first to speak.

He studied Mordret for a few moments, then looked at the millions of motionless vessels behind him and smiled darkly.

"My, oh my. I did not think we would meet again so soon. I guess congratulations are in order?"

Mordret looked… a little eerie, really. There had always been something subtly unnerving about him — a vague sense of wrongness caused by the absence of something that all humans were supposed to possess — but now, a new layer of inexplicable strangeness was layered on top of that. It was as if… as if…

As if Mordret was even less related to anything human than he had been before. As if he was a myriad of broken shards that had been a person once hiding under human skin.

"Why thank you, Sunless."

Mordret smiled and inhaled with a full chest.

"Ah, it feels good to be king."

In an utterly unnerving display of unity, the millions of vessels behind him all smiled at the same time. Sunny struggled to maintain a composed expression, feeling a cold shiver making its way up his spine.

'Never thought there would come a day when I'll see Nightmare Creatures smiling.'

Granted, their attempts at mimicking Mordret looked more like frightening snarls than the pleasant smile playing on his lips.

Nephis spoke at that moment, her even tone showing no sign of being disturbed by the eerie scene:

"You should be feeling it by now. The laws of this realm rejecting you… pushing you out. So, let us not waste time on meaningless pleasantries and get to the point."

She was right. Staying in the waking world for a short while was not impossible, but they were weakened here. More than that, it was straining — the longer Sunny lingered, the more the pressure on him mounted, and the harder it was to push against the walls of the world that seemed to want to crush him.

It was easier to do for Nephis, who shared an inherent connection to both worlds — but only relatively. All that meant was that she could return more often and stay for longer, not that she wasn't affected in the same way.

Actually, there was no telling what relationship Mordret had with the waking world… the War Realm. After all, he had inherited the lineage of War God — and more than that, his powers had to do with

mirrors. As someone who reflected the world in front of him, he could possess an inherent advantage when it came to adapting to its laws.

Then again, he could be having it as rough as Sunny.

Mordret chuckled.

"What is the point, Changing Star? Are you two going to attack me?"

Nephis stared at him evenly.

At first glance, it looked like they had gathered here to fight. However, the millions of vessels, the Shadow Legion, and the three Dream Gates… it was all just for show. A statement of their power and a silent reminder of what would happen if they were to clash.

In truth, the continent would probably not be able to endure the terrifying forces unleashed by a battle between three Supremes, and with its fall, the entire ecosystem that allowed humans to survive on Earth would inevitably follow. That was why they had chosen to meet here, in a place that rejected them and suppressed their power.

When Nephis did not respond, Mordret smiled.

"I thought not. A wise decision — after all, there is no reason for us to become enemies."

Sunny glared at him silently for a few moments.

"Tell that to the survivors of the House of Night, bastard. And to the countless people who suffered when the naval navigation in the waking world all but collapsed in an instant."

Mordret considered him for a short while, then grinned.

"The proper address is Your Royal Majesty, King Mordret… not bastard. Please, have some decorum."

His expression suddenly turned pitiful.

"And if I might add… is it not in bad taste, to call someone a bastard

after having made them an orphan? Ah, how callous! How cruel."

He let out a laugh and then looked at Sunny with an amused smile.

"As for the House of Night, what exactly am I being accused of? What happened was their own fault. The elders of the House of Night could have submitted to the Song Domain of their own free will and become honored vassals of the Queen. Instead, they chose their own pride and arrogance. They committed the gravest sin of all…"

Mordret's gaze turned cold.

"They were weak and tried to hold onto something that they couldn't protect in a world that doesn't tolerate weakness, let alone arrogance. So, they brought it all upon themselves."

He shrugged.

"Plus, I merely removed the elders… or rather, replaced them. There was some collateral damage, of course, but most of the Ascended and Awakened members of the House of Night — the actual Nightwalkers who guide the ships across the ocean — survived."

Mordret sighed.

"Ideally, I would have accepted them back into the fold after the war. The House of Night would have become the House of Nothing, with little disturbance to the infrastructure of the waking world — even the power of the Saints would not have been lost, since I'd be wielding it. So, don't paint me as some kind of mad monster."

He smiled.

"I am a very reasonable monster, if nothing else."

Sunny glared at him darkly.

'Ah, how aggravating.'

He couldn't even erase that irritating smile from Mordret's face.

Nephis finally spoke, breaking the tense silence between them:

"I've been told that trying to make you regret your actions is a meaningless endeavor, Mordret. So, I won't try. However…"

She looked at him calmly.

"The three of us are Supreme. I do not want to repeat the mistakes of the previous generation and embroil humanity in another civil war — we Sovereigns must find a way to coexist instead of fighting each other. I doubt that you want to be destroyed, and since you have attained Supremacy without the help of the Nightmare Spell, there is no reason for us to fight for territory either. So… let us negotiate."

Mordret studied her for a few moments, then smiled.

"Ah, finally! A civil discussion. Goodness gracious, how refreshing... sure, Changing Star. Let us negotiate, indeed."

Chapter-2557: Lesser Evil

Sunny did not like the idea of negotiating with Mordret at all. Not because he was particularly inflexible and wanted to kill the bastard no matter what — although the idea of cleansing the world of Mordret did seem amazingly alluring — but simply because he knew from experience that striking any kind of deal with Mordret was a dangerous gamble, at best.

The chances of being betrayed were too high.

'Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice… wait, how many times have I been fooled by this damned miscreant?'

He frowned, then looked at the sea of motionless figures standing behind the Mirror Gate.

A chill ran down his spine again.

Sunny had felt an inexplicable sense of unease ever since beholding the eerie sight of this silent myriad. Truth be told, he did not even know if the Mordret he knew and the creature standing in front of him were the same being.

By now, they knew that Mordret had attained Supremacy in the process of battling the Skinwalker in a soul duel — that was how he was able to inhabit millions of vessels and destroy the Great Terror. Granted, even Cassie was not clear on which came first. The cause and the result were too closely intertwined to be discerned… perhaps, in this case, they were one and the same.

Regardless, Mordret had somehow managed to manifest a Domain encompassing no one but himself, which went against the very idea of Supremacy — the authority of a Sovereign was supposed to be expressed by exerting it upon something, after all, be it living beings or territory.

Even that was not a problem, though. The problem… was just how many vessels Mordret now possessed. It was simply beyond the realm of reason. If Sunny did not confirm it himself, he would have confidently stated that it was completely impossible.

He knew the pressure of trying to separate his mind across tens of thousands of conduits better than most, after all. And his shades weren't even true incarnations — he could only perceive the world around them and issue commands, not control them directly as he would his own body.

Even that had put an enormous strain on him before he acquired Mind Weave… and mere weeks after acquiring Mind Weave, he was already struggling with maintaining his previous sense of self. All that stemmed from having to split his attention between every shade of the Shadow Legion — and Mordret possessed millions of vessels, not merely thousands.

Even Ki Song had not been able to control such a staggering number of puppets. Even Soul Stealer, a version of Mordret twisted by Corruption, had been driven mad by shattering himself into a million pieces to consume Twilight…

But Mordret did not seem mad.

At least he was not madder than he had been before.

…He did not seem quite human either, though.

The face was the same — if made even more sublime by the rebirth of rising to a higher Rank — and the manners were the same, too. But there was something unfamiliar hiding in the depths of Mordret's gaze.

'How would having millions of bodies change someone's consciousness?'

Especially if that someone had a tenuous claim to personhood, to begin with.

Sunny did not want to show the subtle feeling of being disturbed by this new and unfamiliar Mordret. One thought disturbed him even

more, though…

'Is something similar happening to me and Nephis?'

It was an eerie thought.

In any case, as much as Sunny did not like the idea of negotiating with Mordret, they had little choice.

Despite all his deviousness and complete lack of remorse — Mordret could try to downplay the hideousness of the massacre he had perpetrated upon the House of Night all he wanted, and it would still not convince anyone — he was a Sovereign now.

And a Sovereign could never be treated lightly, least of all one wielding a Divine Aspect.

Sunny and Nephis could probably destroy him and his millions of vessels, but they would not escape that battle unscathed — at best, they would be severely weakened, which could prove fatal before too long.

There was another Sovereign they had to worry about, after all.

There were four Supremes in existence now, and one of them was almost certainly both hostile and a dire threat. So, as long as it could be avoided, they had to make sure that Mordret joined the battle against Asterion — and, ideally, the war for the future of humanity — on their side.

So it was not just that destroying him would cost them too much. They had little reason to destroy him, to begin with, or at least more reasons to keep him alive than to kill him… as long as Mordret could be reasoned with.

And as much as Sunny wanted to deny it, Mordret had told them the truth. He was a very reasonable monster, indeed.

He had betrayed and fooled Sunny a few times. But he was not a pathological schemer — he had fulfilled his promises quite faithfully when it suited him. In the Tomb of Ariel, for example, he had played a key role during the final battle at Verge.

A battle in which Sunny himself had not participated, having betrayed and abandoned his friends…

'Damnation. It's driving me insane.'

Sunny looked at Mordret, sighed, and asked in a resigned tone:

"What exactly is it that you want?"

He had an idea.

Mordret had already expressed that he needed Sunny and Nephis — for no other reason than to be his meat shield against the Dreamspawn. Now that he was the King of Nothing, that seemed like more of a strategy than before.

For no other reason than the fact that a Sovereign could contend against Asterion, while a Saint couldn't… at least Mordret had not seemed to believe that he stood a chance.

Neither had he believed that Sunny and Nephis stood a chance. Therefore, their usefulness as cannon fodder had an expiration date.

That, in turn, would mean that Mordret expected Asterion to defeat them eventually, and therefore had to have a plan for what was going to come next. Now, the outline of that plan was starting to take shape…

Mordret was going to attack.

The world — even two worlds — seemed to be too small for two Supremes, as long as one of these Supremes was Asterion. So, Mordret had to have an intention of destroying the Dreamspawn eventually. Not only because he believed that he would have to in order to survive, but also because he hated Asterion almost as much as he had hated the King of Swords.

He just needed Sunny and Nephis to buy him time.

Mordret smiled.

"What do I want from the two of you? Well, in one word… nothing.

Absolutely nothing."

He laughed.

Chapter-2558: Mirror Domain

Mordret's laughter echoed above the wasteland.

Then, it suddenly turned into a haunting, deafening roar — that was because the millions of vessels behind him all laughed, as well. That scene was so otherworldly eerie that Sunny could not help but grimace.

"Cut the theatrics, will you?"

Mordret chuckled once more, then looked at them with a faint smile. The sea of motionless figures behind him grew still, as well.

Nephis shook her head.

"Saying that you don't need anything from us is a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?"

She looked behind him, at the horde of vessels — some of them human, some of them monstrous. Among the humans, there were a number Awakened, but most of them were mundane: they were the ordinary citizens of the Eastern Quadrant taken by the Skinwalker in the past, only for their bodies to be stolen by Mordret in the end.

"If nothing else, you will need a place to settle. Now that these vessels belong to you, they will be banished from the waking world before too long… and every area of the Dream Realm that is not a Death Zone currently belongs to us. So, unless you want this sea of vessels to turn into a shallow pond, you will have to find a place for them to live."

Mordret let out a wistful sigh.

"A place to call home, is it? What a wonderful sentiment. Why, this is indeed something I would not refuse… so, how about you give me

the Stormsea?"

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"Out of the question."

It was indeed impossible for them to surrender the Stormsea to Mordret. Not only because there were two dozen Citadels there… almost half of them conquered by Mordret while impersonating the elders of the House of Night… but it was also the connective tissue between the former territories of the Song and Sword Domains.

Except for the Road of Shadow far north, in Godgrave, it was the only way to travel between the two parts of the Human Domain — unless one made use of a Dream Gate opened by a Supreme who ruled Night Garden.

Mordret sighed.

"How disappointing… and after I spent so much effort conquering those Citadels, no less."

He shook his head, then smiled.

"You seem to think that you have the upper hand in these negotiations, Changing Star, but let me remind you of something. In truth, I don't really need a region of the Dream Realm to settle my vessels. So, you have nothing to offer me. Your hand is empty."

Nephis frowned and studied him for a few moments.

"The Mirror Realm."

Mordret chuckled.

"Indeed. You do remember, after all."

In fact, Sunny remembered too. It was just that neither Mordret nor Nephis remembered that he had been there with them, as well.

It had happened back in Twilight, when Mordret pulled them into Soul Stealer's Mirror Realm. His own only encompassed the reflection

of his Soul Sea at the time, but the minor Mirror Domain of Soul Stealer encompassed the reflection of the entire city.

Now that Mordret was Supreme and his Domain had fully manifested, there was no telling how vast and lifelike his Mirror Realm was.

Vast enough for millions of vessels to inhabit, perhaps.

'I'll be damned.'

Mordret was not just a one-man nation. He seemed to be carrying an entire kingdom within himself, as well.

And every mirror could become a door to that kingdom — a door that only he could open.

Nephis shook her head.

"Most of your vessels are fragile and mundane. They will need to be fed, sheltered, clothed, and cared for. Even if you have a space to store them, you won't have the resources to keep them alive… not without vast hunting grounds and trade routes. Not to mention that you will want to expand your Domain by usurping more bodies."

She smiled faintly.

"You are not reckless enough to plunder my people, so you will have to hunt down Nightmare Creatures. Therefore… you will still need a territory to call your own."

Mordret sighed.

"Goodness. Fine, I will admit it… I do indeed want to control a territory in the Dream Realm. But not just any territory will do."

Something was telling Sunny that Mordret would not demand to receive Bastion.

'What piece of land does he have his eyes on?'

Mordret believed that Asterion was coming, and that the Human Domain — as well as the Shadow Domain — would eventually fall

into his hands.

He was also prepared to wage a war against Asterion and destroy him.

So, in other words…

Mordret was preparing to wage war on the Human Domain. Just not yet — not while it still belonged to Nephis.

'This... crazy bastard.'

In that light, it made a lot of sense why his first choice was the Stormsea. If one wanted to launch a military campaign against all of humanity, there was no better option.

Not only did the Stormsea wash over the southern shores of both human enclaves in the Dream Realm, it was also nebulous and difficult to navigate.

With his knowledge and experience of sailing its misty waters, Mordret would be able to launch unexpected attacks all along the coast, as well as use the estuary of the River of Tears to advance north rapidly, almost all the way to Ravenheart. He would also be able to storm Rivergate for the second time and reach Bastion in a matter of days, if not hours.

Best of all, he would be able to retreat into the mists of the Stormsea after each raid, saving himself from Asterion's retaliation. The House of Night had existed for so long without being protected by a Sovereign in large part because invading the Stormsea was an inherently perilous endeavor — it was almost impossible to conquer it unless you felt at home in its deadly, nebulous waters.

It was a perfect fit. So perfect, in fact, that Sunny could not help but suspect that Mordret had always kept the eventual return of the Dreamspawn in mind, and aimed his sights on the House of Night in large part for that very reason.

However, it was for that reason as well that Nephis and Sunny would never let the newly risen Supreme usurp the Stormsea.

What other region of the Dream Realm could compare, though? What other place could serve Mordret's goals?

He smiled.

"Give me the Hollow Mountains, then."

Chapter-2559: Uneasy Alliance

Mordret wanted the Hollow Mountains.

Well, it was no surprise that he did. All the reasons why the Stormsea suited his goals applied to the Hollow Mountains, as well — the mountain chain stretched from east to west, bordering the human territories on both sides of Godgrave.

The endless expanse of white mist shrouding the jagged peaks made it all but impossible to invade them, while those who could survive its cold embrace were free to launch unexpected raids on the lands south of the mountains.

Or north of them. That was where the Forgotten Shore, Sunny's lightless kingdom, was located.

In addition to that, Mordret had an affinity to the source of the white mist — to Nothing. So, he would have an easier time surviving there than almost anyone else. Of course, his Aspect had to do with mirrors and reflections… which were kin to Nothing Creatures, but not exactly the same thing.

In a sense, the Hollow Mountains were to Mordret what the Shadow Realm was to Sunny. Perfect hunting grounds that were as full of promise as they were perilous and deadly.

Granted, that only encompassed the surface of the hollow peaks, not the dark depths inside them — the Underworld. Out there, in the realm of true darkness, Mordret would be just as helpless as Sunny… after all, there could be no reflections without light, so his powers would be rendered useless.

Mordret seemed to be getting exactly what he wanted. However, Sunny and Nephis had no reason to refuse him — or at least no reason that was good enough to deny him the Hollow Mountains.

They themselves had no use for them, and there were no human colonies being built within the mist.

All in all…

Things could have been worse.

A new Sovereign had risen from the ranks of humanity, and while he was not exactly a reliable ally, he was not inherently hostile either. Mordret might have been a monster who knew neither regret nor remorse, but he did not usually act without reason — otherwise, it would have been the entire population of EQSC consumed by him instead of the Skinwalker.

On the bright side, humanity had another Supreme now, and an immensely powerful one at that. If there was one predictable thing about Mordret, it was that he always acted in self-interest… and in the grand scheme of things, his interests coincided with those of Sunny and Nephis.

After all, the destruction of their world was imminent. Once Earth was fully consumed by the Dream Realm, everything that was not Corrupted would be besieged by the Nightmare Creatures — including those fallen deities of the Cursed and Unholy Rank. When that happened, Mordret would have little choice but to fight side by side with other human Sovereigns in order to survive.

Sunny understood that rationally…

But, still, negotiating with the bastard was exceedingly frustrating.

'Ah… I want to rip that damn smile off his face…'

He had dismissed the Shadow Legion. The endless sea of Mordret's vessels was disappearing into the rippling surface of the Mirror Gate, too — they were entering the Mirror Realm, leaving the desolate expanse of the Eastern Quadrant behind.

Mordret himself was still here, though, looking at them with a polite smile.

"...Ah, yes, I do agree. We should continue this conversation in a

more comfortable setting."

His smile was the same, but his face betrayed subtle signs of fatigue. The War Realm was straining to expel them, and by now, the pressure was crushing. On top of that, Mordret had only recently concluded the dreadful battle against the Skinwalker and undergone the evolution to Supremacy — he had not had the chance to rest and recover yet, so he was in rough shape.

The negotiations were far from being over, of course. They had only set out the very fundamental principles of their future coexistence, so the details would have to be decided later — in the presence of people who could formulate a proper treaty.

It was not a question of authority, but merely of convenience.

Mordret would need building materials and a steady supply of clean drinking water and food to establish his kingdom in the Hollow Mountains, for example, since it was going to take him some time and a lot of effort to make it self-sufficient. Therefore, some kind of trade agreement would have to be established, and Sunny and Nephis were not the best people to define it.

There were countless small details like that. There was the question of what they would be getting in return, as well…

And above all else, they were not going to agree on anything with Mordret unless Kai was present in the room, and could confirm that the King of Nothing was being sincere in his willingness to, if not cooperate, then at least coexist with the Human Domain.

So, he was invited to Bastion. The negotiations would continue on the Ivory Island, with most members of the cohort — as well as a team of relevant professionals — present. As for Mordret, he did not have a cohort, close companions, or talented subordinates. Therefore, he would have to oversee the entire process himself.

'I can't believe this is my life now.'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, thinking that he had never expected to negotiate a trade agreement with Mordret one day.

Life was, indeed, full of surprises.

They were also going to discuss the Dreamspawn in more detail then. Granted, Mordret did not seem too keen on the idea of cementing an alliance to deal with Asterion — despite everything, he was entirely convinced that Sunny and Nephis were a lost cause. So, he wasn't inclined to help them understand what his former caretaker was capable of.

All knowledge Mordret possessed would have to be exchanged for something. That was what Sunny and Nephis were getting in return for building materials and food supplies, above all else.

"Well, then. I'll depart first."

Mordret gave them a perfunctory bow and vanished without a trace. His Dream Gate disappeared, as well, leaving Sunny and Nephis alone on the desolate wasteland.

Sunny studied the landscape around them for a long while, and then suddenly laughed.

"I... realized something just now."

He looked at Nephis and shook his head in disbelief.

"This is now the safest place in the world. Both worlds, really."

Chapter-2560: Sudden Peace

The Eastern Quadrant had been ravaged by war. The peculiar thing about the Skinwalker, however, was that the Great Terror did not discriminate between people and abominations — it took every vessel it could find, striving to grow and spread as much as possible, no matter whom it consumed.

And while humans were still resisting the dreadful fiend, the Nightmare Creatures populating the wilderness of the Eastern Quadrant had all been wiped out and absorbed by the Skinwalker some time ago. Their bodies were then inherited by Mordret, who took them into his Mirror Realm.

So, at the moment, the Eastern Quadrant was the only place in either of the worlds that was completely void of abominations. There were still Nightmare Gates here, of course, which meant that new monsters would wander through them sooner or later. But, for now, this continent was completely safe and cleansed of Corruption.

Like all continents used to be.

Nephis remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Indeed. It is quite ironic, isn't it? Although his motivation was entirely selfish, Mordret had done a great service for humanity. He saved an entire Quadrant… and maybe much more, considering that the Skinwalker was on the verge of evolving."

Sunny let out a bitter laugh.

"You are right. He did something that neither of us had managed to do... Mordret, of all people!"

Nephis possessed great power, but that power was largely straightforward. Sunny wielded a subtler Aspect, but he still could

not have eradicated the Skinwalker without shattering the entire continent — even then, a few vessels would have survived and hidden themselves somewhere else, so that plague would have started spreading in a different corner of the world before too long.

But Mordret possessed a power that was uniquely suited to destroying creatures of exactly that kind. By challenging the Skinwalker to a soul duel, he had destroyed the very root of the Great Terror without the need to annihilate each and every one of its vessels.

And now…

A sudden realization hit Sunny.

"The war is over."

A lion's share of humanity's forces were currently concentrated in the Eastern Quadrant — mundane soldiers and Awakened alike. The same went for Saints. Even Jet was here, as well as the Night Garden… now, all these people had nothing to do.

The military forces would have to be relocated to other flashpoints — some here on Earth, some in the Dream Realm. All of this had happened so unexpectedly that there was no plan in place… many strategic meetings would have to happen to adjust the resources of humanity according to the new reality.

There was the question of the evacuation, as well. The population of the Eastern Quadrant was currently being evacuated to other Quadrants and the Dream Realm — now, the primary reason for that exodus was gone.

Were they going to stop the evacuation and abandon plans of leaving the Eastern Quadrant, or continue to ferry people away? The Dream Realm was waiting, after all, and everyone would have to abandon the waking world sooner or later.

There were many things to decide.

Sunny could already feel his head hurting.

Nephis gave him a guarded look, and then suddenly asked:

"Do you think that we really are no match for the Dreamspawn?"

She seemed to be displeased and somewhat uneasy because of what Mordret had said.

Aster, Song, Vale…

These were the three names that had defined her childhood. Song and Vale were dead now, but Aster remained — more than that, Nephis now knew that, in large part, she survived because Asterion had held the other two Sovereigns back and prevented them from trying to dispose of her too openly.

Not out of concern for her or some twisted form of sentimentality, but simply because he had needed her to Awaken to harvest the lineage of Sun God.

Sunny pursed his lips and considered his words for a while.

Eventually, he sighed.

"The Dreamspawn seems to possess powers that have to do with mind manipulation. Among all the Nightmare Creatures that I've faced, those that mess with your mind were absolutely the worst. So… I do believe that dealing with him will be a troublesome affair."

Sunny's expression darkened.

"I guess what I am trying to say is that we should not be expecting a clean victory. This one… we will have to bleed for this one, I think."

He paused, then looked at Nephis and asked:

"What do you think?"

She studied the desolate landscape around them for a while, then shrugged.

"It is as you said. It will be a tough fight, and we will not win it without paying a price. But… we will win it. I believe it."

Sunny nodded.

"So do I. I don't think it's going to be very pleasant, though."

He shook his head dejectedly.

What was it with Supremes and fighting each other instead of focusing their ire on the Nightmare Creatures?

Out of the seven Sovereigns born from humanity up to this point, three had already perished — and all three of them had been killed by other Supremes, not by powerful abominations.

Broken Sword, Ki Song, and Anvil…

Asterion would join them eventually, and by then, not just some, but most human Supremes would have fallen to a human's blade.

'Children of War, indeed.'

Perhaps Eurys had a point in disliking Sunny and his kind.

Looking at the strangely tranquil landscape of the Eastern Quadrant, Nephis inhaled deeply. Perhaps she was thinking about how this was her eventual goal — a world free of the Nightmares…

Perhaps she was simply thinking about the mountain of decisions she would have to make regarding the relocation of her armies.

Turning to the radiant Dream Gate, Nephis looked at her shadow — where a different incarnation of Sunny was hiding — and then back at him.

"We should return to Bastion. Are you coming?"

Sunny hesitated for a little while, then smiled.

"No. I think I am going to catch a ride with Jet. She is going to take the Night Garden back to Stormsea soon, isn't she?"

Nephis studied him for a moment, then nodded and headed toward the Gate.

"Don't fall into a coma this time, please! If you don't mind."

Sunny smiled as he turned the other way.

"I can't say that I won't, but I will definitely try…"

Chapter-2561: A Leisurely Ride

Soon, Nephis and her Dream Gate were gone. Sunny dismissed his as well and found himself standing alone on the scorched earth of the desolate wasteland, beneath the vast blue sky of the Eastern Quadrant. The idea that he was completely safe, for once in his life, felt alien.

'What a strange day.'

Sunny knew that the world was going to be shaken quite soon. People would learn that the desperate war against the Skinwalker had come to a sudden end — that alone was enough to cause quite a tumult.

This news would be followed by the shocking revelation that a new Sovereign had risen to the throne of Supremacy… and that he was none other than Mordret, the wayward son of the King of Swords.

The public did not know much about Mordret — except for the fact that he had betrayed his clan, destroyed the House of Night on the Queen's orders, and nearly conquered the Sword Domain all on his own while the war was raging in Godgrave.

Actually, now that Sunny thought about it, perhaps people would not be as surprised that Mordret had become a Sovereign as he was. What mattered more was the fact that the general public was not aware of his own continued existence, and neither did many people know that Asterion was alive and Supreme, as well.

So, for most people, the King of Nothing would seem to be the only Sovereign in existence apart from Changing Star. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he would seem like the second most important person in the world…

And that person was an eerie fiend who possessed a million bodies

and chose to dwell in the cold mists of the Hollow Mountains instead of living among people.

'Poor humanity. It seems to only have two demigods, and half of all demigods it has are completely insane.'

The saddest part was that if everyone knew that there were actually four Supremes alive today, the proportion would not get any better. Arguably, it would only get worse.

Not to mention that people who regarded Nephis as a sane person were woefully wrong. So, really, all of the human demigods were some kind of unhinged.

'Ignorance is truly bliss.'

Shaking his head, Sunny looked around and took in the view of the cleansed continent. The sun was falling toward the horizon by then, so his shadow lay long on the ground. He called, and a tenebrous steed rose from his shadow, casting the chilling gaze of its crimson eyes down at him.

The sun glinted on its wolf-like fangs and adamantine horns.

Nightmare snorted quietly, and the resulting gust of wind made Sunny's hair dance chaotically.

He grimaced, then brushed his hair away from his eyes and looked at Nightmare with a smile.

"I missed you too, buddy."

Climbing into the saddle, Sunny sent his destrier toward the coast.

He was currently near the very heart of the Eastern Quadrant, so the two of them would have to cross the entire continent to reach the water where the Night Garden rested on the waves… so, Nightmare could cross it in a few hours at a leisurely pace.

Of course, Sunny himself could reach the coast even faster if he used Shadow Step. However, he was not in a hurry — his other incarnations were already quite busy, but this one could take a well-

deserved break. After all, it was not every day that one encountered an entire continent devoid of Nightmare Creatures… that never happened, in fact.

The Eastern Quadrant was like a park at the moment, so Sunny was in the mood for a little sightseeing. He wanted to gather his thoughts before meeting Jet, as well.

A lot had happened in the last couple of months. His incarnations had not been idle during his stay in the Palace of Imagination, and he was quite busy in the weeks after regaining his senses as well. Now, there was this whole story with Mordret… gods, that devious bastard was really Supreme now… and Asterion was looming over the world, as well.

Somehow, Sunny had a feeling that he would not experience a moment of peace like this one in a long while.

'Ah… I might be forced to change my plans.'

Two fragments of Weaver's lineage remained unclaimed — the Spirit Weave and the Shadow Weave. The former was presumably hidden somewhere on the Night Garden, or at least connected to it, while the latter was lost in the dark depths of the Underworld.

Sunny had made a tentative plan to recover all parts of Weaver's Lineage one after another, or at least attempt to. Now, however, it seemed like an expedition into the Underworld would have to be postponed until after Asterion was dealt with. That saddened him a little.

'I've grown so much stronger after assimilating Flesh Weave and Mind Weave…'

There was also the peculiar case of the Blood Weave, Bone Weave, and Flesh Weave fusing and enhancing each other. So, he had reason to believe that a similar kind of synergy — perhaps even on a much larger scale — would happen when the entire Lineage was reassembled.

And he was also sure that absorbing both Spirit Weave and Shadow

Weave would hurt like hell.

Sunny sighed, already uncomfortable by simply thinking about that inevitable future.

'Once I collect all seven fragments, though…'

Then, he would be ready to challenge the Fifth Nightmare.

If he was going to challenge it, after all, instead of searching for a way to reach Apotheosis without the help of the Spell.

As Nightmare galloped across the wasteland, Sunny thought back to what had happened in the last few weeks.

'I actually can't believe how much transpired in that short amount of time.'

It had really been a month full of all kinds of happenings.

'Let's see…'

What had happened first?

'Oh, right.'

It was the little gift he sent to Teacher Julius… the crowning achievement and the last nail in the coffin of his academic career.

His magnum opus, as far as academic research went.

Chapter-2562: Magnum Opus

While one of Sunny's incarnations was experiencing the strangest things in the Palace of Imagination — like PTVs that drove on tiny explosions and a whole city of people who had no idea what a Nightmare Creature was — the rest of him was busy with other endeavors.

In fact, he had more free time than usual.

That was because Slayer was still resting in the dark flames of his soul, evolving, so there was no need to fight her every week… and neither was there a need to recover from those brutal fights, either.

So, Sunny decided to do something he had been thinking about ever since returning from Ariel's Game.

He wanted to write a research paper… and not just any paper at that.

Sunny wanted to write a paper to end all papers. The best and most comprehensive report on the history of the world — its inception, its end, and all the things that had happened since.

After all, he was in a unique position. Sunny was the person who knew the most about the truth of things — the gods, the daemons, the Nine… the Void, the Forgotten God. Most importantly, he knew the most about Weaver and the purpose of the Nightmare Spell.

Of course, there were still gaps in his knowledge. Other people possessed pieces of knowledge that he did not, as well — the Sovereigns, for example, had known much more than he did about certain things. Among them, Asterion probably knew secrets that Sunny could not even dream about.

But nobody had such a structured and comprehensive knowledge of the framework that formed all of existence, as well as the main

characters of history and the roles they had played.

Knowledge was power, so it was no surprise that the Sovereigns had hoarded their knowledge, refusing to share it with anyone. But Sunny was of a different mind — Nephis was the same, or she would not have given her fateful speech about how Earth was doomed to be consumed by the Dream Realm.

Since he possessed precious knowledge, he wanted to share it with the world. He had an obligation to let people learn as much as possible about the reality they lived in — not only because he knew how fervently those curious about the truth strived to quench their thirst for knowledge, but also because he wanted as many people to be as powerful as they could be.

After all, Sunny was not the only person with a keen mind out there. If many people were armed with the knowledge he possessed, some of them would use it as ammunition to make their own discoveries and help humanity in their own way.

That, in truth, was the greatest power humanity possessed — the ability to accumulate knowledge and, therefore, solve problems collectively. Every new generation of humans was the culmination of everything the countless previous generations had learned and achieved, so their growth was exponential.

At least that was what Sunny wanted to believe as a former academic.

His tenure at the Academy might have come to an abrupt end, but the spirit of exploration still burned in his heart…

And it was in that spirit that Sunny sat behind a desk in the Dark Castle and stared at an empty journal in front of him.

The journal in and of itself was a mythical artifact — that was because Sunny had been too lazy to go find writing paper and just manifested shadows into a semblance of one, making each sheet permanent. Then, he bound the white sheets with black thread and fashioned a leather cover from the hide of a Nightmare Creature he had slain in the Burned Forest.

The ink was made from the materials scavenged here on the Forgotten Shore...

And since Sunny was now a demigod, everything he made was technically a mythical item.

That said, he would have vastly preferred to just type the entire research paper on a communicator, but sadly, that would require writing it in the waking world — and while Sunny could very well spend some time there, it was never pleasant.

So, with a sigh, he started writing by hand.

The first thing he wrote was the title, of course… which was quite simple and to the point.

On the first page of the journal, a few words appeared under his pen.

The letters read:

The Exploration Report on Everything, by: Nobody.

***

Many days later — having already received Mind Weave — Sunny did travel to the waking world, after all.

The journal containing the exploration report felt heavy in his hand.

He put all of the knowledge about the history and fate of the Dream Realm onto these pages. The Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel concentrated on the nature of the Great River Civilization and on the stories of Weave told to him by Ananke, omitting the truths learned by him in the Estuary…

But this time, Sunny shared everything he knew. He wrote about the inception of the world, the gods and their forgotten sibling, the origin of the daemons, the cause of the conflict between the daemons and the gods, as well as the calamitous end of their war, Weaver, and the birth and purpose of the Nightmare Spell.

He wrote about the Seven Divine Realms, as well — about how the

Dream Realm came to be, how it consumed the mortal realms, how the Nightmare Spell infected the isolated Divine Realms one after another, and how they still ended up being swallowed by the growing realm of the Forgotten God… with Earth, War Realm, being the last.

And much more.

So much more, in fact, that his hand still seemed to be hurting from holding the pen…and that's considering that he had manifested a few additional hands out of the shadows to hasten the process.

In fact, Sunny had written two versions of the Exploration Report on Everything instead of one.

The first contained all that knowledge in its pure form. The second replaced the name of the Forgotten God… Dream God… with a rune for someone — or something — unknown.

That was because not just anyone could retain the forbidden knowledge about the Forgotten God. Actually, few people could — and even for them, it was somewhat dangerous. Even mentioning his existence put a strain on the souls of living beings, because the world was still denying his existence. So, Sunny only intended to share the full version of his report with those of higher Ranks.

Now, all that remained was to deliver the fruit of his decade-long quest to uncover the truth into the hands of the public.

Standing in front of the massive gates, Sunny looked up and studied the familiar shape of a towering alloy wall.

After so many years of having been away, he returned to the Awakened Academy.

Chapter-2563: Old Haunts

Sunny and Nephis had stood on this exact spot eleven years ago, waiting for the gates of the Academy to open for them… well, it had been eleven years for the world, but a full dozen for them, considering the time spent in the Tomb of Ariel.

It was funny to think that they had not even known each other back then. They had not paid much attention to each other, either — Sunny had been busy thinking about the advice given to him by Jet during the drive from the police station, while Nephis was listening to music and looking at the walls of the Academy with an aloof expression.

They had just become Sleepers. And now, twelve years later… they were both Supreme. They were demigods wielding power so dreadful that the towering walls of the Academy, which had seemed impossible to breach once, were not even worth thinking about. Sunny and Nephis were capable of conquering all of Earth now — or destroying it, if they so wished.

'How times have changed.'

Sunny could not help but think about how much that short conversation with Jet had shaped his life. She had shared a few pieces of priceless wisdom with him back then — wisdom that she herself had earned by making mistakes and paying for each one with blood. Among other things, Sunny would have never chosen to dedicate his time at the Academy to learning how to survive in the wilderness.

He would have spent those few weeks training uselessly with a sword, instead. Then, he would not have had the knowledge to piece together the past of the Forgotten Shore… which was the start of it all. In fact, he would have drowned immediately after entering the Dream Realm on the winter solstice. It was Teacher Julius, after all,

who had insisted that Sunny learned how to swim.

'It is strange to think that my life could have ended so ingloriously all the way back then.'

A future Sovereign died as a Sleeper because he didn't know how to swim. That would have been quite a twist of fate.

Shaking his head, Sunny looked at the gates of the Academy. The sea of candles in front of them still burned — they had been placed there by those who hoped for Changing Star's safe return after the siege of the Crimson Spire, initially, but people continued to light new candles even now that Nephis was Supreme and ruled the entire world.

If anything, there were more candles burning in front of the Academy than ever before. The sea of fragile flames was very much like humanity itself, each one representing someone's hopes and dreams. Individual flames could be extinguished and snuffed out, but the radiance of the candles as a whole never dimmed.

If there was a physical representation of the Human Domain, this was it — the immortal flame that refused to go out, fueled by longing.

…And, of course, each of the countless candles had a shadow.

No one was going to open the gates of the Academy for Sunny this time, and he did not need them either. Instead, he simply stepped through the shadows and entered the Academy grounds unannounced, moving unseen.

This soon after the winter solstice, there were not many Sleepers attending, so Sunny did not need to exert himself even a little to remain unnoticed. He cast his shadow sense far and wide, easily encompassing the entire Academy, and sensed every person within its walls — the students, the instructors, and the staff.

Then, following a strange impulse, Sunny spent some time visiting his old haunts and remembering the past. The assembly hall where he had met Cassie for the first time, both of them assumed to be no different from walking dead and relegated to the corpse corner, his

small room in the Sleeper dormitory… gods, it had felt like the pinnacle of luxury back then…

The cafeteria where he had enjoyed good food for the first time in his life, the lecture hall where he had taught a class of unruly Sleepers as a guest lecturer, the fortified room on one of the underground levels of the Academy's medical center where Nephis had been kept while wandering the Dream Realm alone — that one had been renovated after being blown up — and a few more places.

All of them contained memories that were meaningful to him. These memories were like ghosts — no one else remembered to cherish these quiet moments, and they only continued to exist in his head. All traces of the life Sunny had lived were erased from the world, and the places he visited did not mean anything to anyone anymore… not in the same way they meant the world to him, at least.

Sunny was not exactly a sentimental person, so it was strange to find himself wasting time on a walk down memory lane. But it was just that… he had a feeling that he would not return to the Awakened Academy ever again.

Entering the waking world was getting hard now that he was Supreme, and it would only get harder in the future. Earth itself was changing, too — dying, really.

So, Sunny had a feeling that the next time he saw the Academy, it would be as a ruin lost in some godforsaken corner of the Dream Realm.

But that was alright, as well.

Time was flowing, and humanity was doing its best not to fall behind its current. The nature of the Awakening was different now compared to when he had been a Sleeper — more and more of those infected by the Nightmare Spell resided in the Dream Realm, and so, the way they were taught was changing as well.

There were already branches of the Academy in the Dream Realm. The first one had been opened in Ravenheart, while the second one was located in Bastion — granted, they focused more on preparing

young men and women who wanted to challenge the First Nightmare for its terrible demands.

The trial of the winter solstice itself was going to become a thing of the past before too long. After all, there would be no distinction between the Dream Realm and the waking world anymore, so the Spell would have no need and no reason to send Sleepers on a deadly pilgrimage.

'Awakened live long lives…'

And someone like Sunny was almost immortal.

When he looked at the world in a hundred years, would there be anything left behind from the one that he knew?

Letting out a quiet sigh, Sunny looked around one last time, then made his way to the Wilderness Survival classroom. Actually, Teacher Julius did not teach here anymore — he and his family resided permanently in Bastion now, and the old man spent his days building a new education system for the brave new world being built in the Dream Realm by the Human Domain.

But he still visited NQSC occasionally, and when he did, this classroom served as his office.

Walking over to the desk, Sunny placed the journal on its surface and studied it for a few moments.

Then, hearing someone opening the door, he dissolved into the shadows.

His job here was done — he had submitted his last research paper to the man he trusted to treat it caringly the most.

And what a research paper it was…

Sunny sighed bitterly.

'Oh, gods… all the contribution points I am missing out on! Ah, my heart hurts…'

Chapter-2564: Wayward Student

Teacher Julius had never expected his twilight years to be so very busy. He remembered thinking of retiring a few years back — the world was constantly changing, and he was afraid of not being able to keep pace with it… and as much as it pained him to admit, his lessons, which had been vital for countless young Sleepers in the past, had not had high attendance in a long, long while.

That was only natural, considering that Awakened of the Second and Third Generations… gods, were they on the Fourth generation, already?... had absorbed most skills necessary for survival in the wilderness of the Dream Realm as children. Granted, those school curricula were quite shallow, never delving deeply into the subjects he felt passionate about.

So, Julius had thought about hanging his hat.

Who knew that he and his family would become so involved with building a brighter future for humanity on behalf of the new Domain? His wife was doing important work helping refugees settle in Bastion, for example. Julius himself, meanwhile, had found himself in charge of developing an entire new education system for youths residing in the Dream Realm.

There was so much he and the team of academics under his leadership had to consider, envision, and implement.

After all, they not only needed to make sure that children taken to the Dream Realm learned everything they needed to know about that perilous world and developed into competent adults, they also needed to make sure that children that would be born in the Dream Realm in the future did not forget their roots, inheriting the knowledge and culture of Earth…

Which, apparently, was not long for this world. Soon enough, Earth

would become a part of the Dream Realm, too — a fact that he was still trying to come to terms with.

In any case, Julius had spent most of his time in Bastion, since that was where the governing institutions of humanity were slowly migrating. His life there was both eventful and meaningful… but he still enjoyed his rare visits to NQSC.

After all, this was where he had spent most of his life — especially the familiar grounds of the Awakened Academy.

Julius took his time walking along the paths of the Academy park before entering the Sleeper Compound and making his way to his former classroom. This was where his NQSC office was now located — despite knowing how many calls and communications with valued colleagues who still resided on Earth awaited him, his gait was ginger and energetic, and he was humming a boisterous tune.

'Better finish everything quickly, get all the planned social engagements out of the way, and get back home…'

There was something new and exciting happening in Bastion every day. Not too long ago, young Bethany finally managed to launch her ambitious hydroelectric power plant. Now, a magical tramway was being built along the main thoroughfare, and there were countless other things being created and invented as well. Julius did not want to miss anything.

Sadly, he knew that many of his colleagues were quite stubborn and cantankerous. So, the scheduled meetings were probably going to run late… especially because his old academic rival, Sando — who was not as smug these days, but still a complete hack — would be participating in one of them.

"Let's see. It's almost time for the call with the Song Foundation… huh? What is that?"

Julius blinked a couple of times, which caused his bushy eyebrows to perform a complicated and slightly frightening dance.

There, on his table, lay something that he did not recognize. It was a

leather-bound journal that looked quite mundane, but emanated a daunting feeling of something uncanny… almost mystical.

There was also a handwritten note placed near it, with neat cursive filling it. The paper was black, and the ink was silver-white — the note looked like a piece of the dark sky that someone had cut carelessly from the fabric of the night, taking the stars and starlight with it.

Julius scratched the tip of his nose.

"Did I forget to lock the door?"

The Awakened Academy was a restricted area with heavy security, so no one was supposed to be able to enter his office unannounced.

His curiosity won over his caution, though — well, naturally — and Julius picked up the note after sitting behind the desk.

His eyebrows climbed higher and higher as he read it.

The neat handwriting read:

[Teacher Julius

You probably don't remember me, but I was once your student.

Many years have passed since the days I attended the Awakened Academy, yet I always remember your lessons fondly. They are the reason I survived long enough to write you this note. As I grow older, I often reminisce about the past: many things have changed, and I have changed as well. That, too, is a privilege I earned thanks to you.

You promised to make me immortal on the first day we met. Please forgive your incompetent student, Teacher Julius — I am not quite immortal yet. But I am working on it.

Meeting you was truly my great fortune. I don't think I ever thanked you properly for everything you've done for me, so please allow me to express my gratitude in this modest way.

Below, you'll find an exploration report I compiled after traveling far

and wide in the Dream Realm, visiting places that no human has ever reached and unraveling mysteries that no one has ever been able to solve — which, in hindsight, was quite a foolish affair, considering how many times I almost fell victim to my curiosity.

However, as Professor Obel used to say, humanity needs a bit of stupidity to survive.

So, please, enjoy the fruits of my stupidity.

Best Regards,

Nobody]

Teacher Julius stared at the note in bewilderment.

"Nobody? The Nobody?!"

Had the author of the Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel actually been his student once?

'I would have remembered such an outstanding student, surely...'

Completely forgetting about his schedule, Julius grabbed the leather-bound journal and read the title embossed on the cover.

"The Exploration Report on… Everything?"

Opening the journal with a trembling hand, he read the first few lines.

His eyes widened like saucers.

"W—what?!"

Chapter-2565: The Exploration Report on Everything

Teacher Julius spent almost an hour staring just at the first page of the Exploration Report on Everything. The first paragraph alone was enough to shatter reality as humans knew it, turning every known axiom upside down.

It read…

[In the beginning, there was only the boundless, eternal Void. From that dark abyss, the Creatures of the Void were born. Just like chaos itself, they were endless and everlasting, vast and forever changing. But then came desire, and with it came direction. From it, the seven gods were born.]

Julius took a shaky breath.

"Seven gods? But there were only six gods…"

Granted, countless people had suggested the existence of the seventh god before — for no other reason than the prevalence of the number seven in everything that had to do with the Nightmare Spell, as well as with the bygone civilizations of the Dream Realm.

In fact, many assumed that the mystical significance of the number seven was connected to the fallen pantheon — that there had been seven gods, and everything was inclined to come in sevens because of them, like a sacral echo.

Of course, there was not a shred of evidence to support this fanciful theory. People just liked orderly things, and the strange contradiction of there only being six gods made them feel uncomfortable. So, they stretched the truth to support the conclusion they had already made… needless to say, such conduct was woefully unscientific.

Well, at least they were better than the hapless romantics who claimed that there had only been six gods because the seventh was yet to be born. That alleged seventh god, unsurprisingly, was supposed to be born of humanity and become its savior — which smelled suspiciously like religion, not science.

Teacher Julius frowned.

"Can Nobody be one of those hacks? No, surely not…"

He took a deep breath and delved into reading.

The more he read, the more he was enthralled by the Exploration Report. Just a few minutes later, it became apparent that no… Nobody was not a hack.

The report was written in a clear, crisp language. Everything was relayed in simple words and left no room for ambiguity. The picture it painted was wonderfully coherent — so coherent, in fact, that Julius could not help but feel that what he was reading had to be true.

Best of all, the Exploration Report was not merely a collection of curious musings. It was a proper research paper that drew from and referenced countless established works and historical documents, as well as providing sources for every unsubstantiated claim it made.

Granted, some of those sources were quite fantastical, like the description of a Memory that contained a drop of Shadow God's blood or a poem written by the Demon of Dread on the surface of a mystical lake. Julius doubted that anyone could receive such a Memory again or travel to the Estuary of the Great River in the Tomb of Arel to confirm Nobody's findings.

So, theoretically, the Exploration Report on Everything could still turn out to be a fabrication… but Julius doubted that it was. The facts Nobody presented and the arguments they made fit together too well, and everything clicked together too perfectly, as if falling into place.

More than that, the discoveries made by the mysterious explorer

flawlessly filled the holes in the contemporary understanding of the Dream Realm and its history. Many things had never quite fit together before — but now, Julius saw that it was because the puzzle had been missing pieces. Nobody provided these pieces, and so…

"It all makes sense!"

He felt as if he had been blind all his life, and now finally gained sight.

That was the best feeling in the world… the thing that had drawn him to science and academic work, to begin with.

"Wonderful, simply wonderful…"

Not too long ago, Julius had felt like an old man. But now, suddenly, he felt like a little kid again.

The Exploration Report on Everything was broadly divided into three parts. The first dealt with the cosmology of the Dream Realm, exploring the relationship between the Void and the Flame, and therefore the war between the Void Creatures and the gods born of Desire. It explained how the universal laws of existence had been created, and how the gods used them to contain the Void.

While imprisoning one of their own… the [unknown]… with it.

The second part was dedicated to the Unknown and his seven children — the daemons.

Daemons had always been the strangest and most mysterious deities among the lesser pantheon, so learning that they were fragments of a god's shattered soul was quite a revelation… one that provided a perfect explanation for why they seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and why they had been feared by the gods.

'Forbidden knowledge?'

Nobody explained in detail why most information about the seventh god was censored in his exploration report. According to him, the world denied the existence of the Unknown, as willed by the gods, and no knowledge of the seventh god's identity could be retained by

ordinary people. In worst cases, beholding the forbidden truth could even be a danger in and of itself.

That said… the uncensored version of the Exploration Report on Everything existed, as well. It was just that gaining access to it required passing a mysterious trial.

Julius did not know what the trial was, since that knowledge was shrouded in shadows — discovering it was a test in and of itself. So, only those who were powerful, persistent, determined, and possessed an inquisitive mind would gain the right to know the full truth.

One thing Julius did know, however, was that the Exploration Report on Everything would become a motivation to walk the Path of Ascension for some people — there weren't many of them, but each one was special. They were the kind of people who did not care for glory and were indifferent to the promise of power, but were burning with curiosity and the desire to solve the mysteries of the world.

To those who burned with the spirit of exploration, the report written by Nobody would become the Holy Grail.

'How… exciting!"

At that moment, Julius recalled a particular student, for some reason. His memory was quite vague, enough so that he could not even remember their face or name, but that student would have definitely asked something like "what the hell is a Holy Grail?" if they heard this.

Nevertheless, they were the exact type of person who would endeavor to become Transcendent simply to get their hands on the uncensored version of the Exploration Report on Everything.

In fact, if Julius was not too old to spend months on end in places without good plumbing, he would have been tempted to challenge a Nightmare or two himself.

In any case, the second part of the exploration report described the origin of daemons, went into detail about the trials and tribulations each of them had endured, and concluded with the explanation of

how the Doom War started — as well as describing the role a mysterious group known as the Nine had played in fanning the flames of the conflict between the daemons and the gods.

It was one startling revelation after another. A true paradise for a researcher, and a bottomless well of shocking new truths.

And then, there was the third part…

Which was even more earth-shattering than the previous two.

Julius actually dropped Nobody's journal when he read the first sentence.

It was quite a provocative statement, indeed.

[The Nightmare Spell is a lullaby that Weaver sang to tame the Unknown.]

Picking up the Exploration Report with trembling hands, Julius continued to read as if possessed.

"No, it can't be… can it? The Spell! This is the explanation of the Nightmare Spell!"

The third part of the Exploration Report on Everything was dedicated to Weaver, the Demon of Fate, and the Nightmare Spell they had created… to lull the Unknown to sleep and forge new gods to slay him.

This was the most shocking collection of revelations written down by Nobody, by far. The Nightmare Spell was the closest thing people had to a god — it governed all of the world, deciding fates as it saw fit.

It was also the greatest secret in the world.

But not anymore.

"This… this is…"

Utterly speechless, Julius closed the leather journal and stared at its cover in stunned silence.

The bold title did not seem so bold anymore.

"The Exploration Report on Everything."

A weak smile appeared on his face.

That Nobody… they weren't kidding.

Chapter-2566: Nobody Knows

Teacher Julius did not waste any time and published the Exploration Report in open access. He also shared the news about the groundbreaking new research paper with his fellow colleagues in the academic circles — as a result, it gained traction quite swiftly. Its veracity also did not come under too much scrutiny, considering the reputation of the man who published it.

Countless people in the waking world were reading the Exploration Report on Everything on the network, while those in the Dream Realm fought to get their hands on a printed copy. Some even copied it by hand, and these handwritten copies then changed hands as they were lent and borrowed from friends and acquaintances.

The result… was explosive.

In a short while, the many mysteries revealed by Nobody were all that people talked about. And it was no surprise — after all, Nobody had gone and revealed the greatest secrets of the world in one fell swoop.

It was no different from receiving divine scripture from a messenger from the gods.

From how the world had been created to how it ended, from what forces governed all of existence to why the Nightmare Spell existed.

There were these great revelations, and countless smaller ones, as well — things that some people here and there knew, but had never been systematically explained and placed into a coherent framework. Like which powers of the Awakened came from the Awakening itself and which ones were gifted to them by the Spell, why Nightmare Creatures burned with a demented determination to destroy anything untouched by the Corruption, what the Shadow Realm and the afterlife were, and so on.

The mere fact that a thorough explanation of what happened to human souls after death did not make the front pages was insane. But it did not — the Exploration Report on Everything was simply too astonishing.

It was indeed a clear and concise explanation… of everything.

For a few weeks, the world had gone completely mad about the mysteries solved by Nobody. Countless gatherings and televised discussion panels took place, with attendance and viewership breaking records — it was comparable, and at times more sought after, than the fateful speech made by Changing Star.

These conversations were carried into the private lives of everyone, as well. Everyone was talking about Nobody and their report — at the dinner table, while drinking with buddies at the bar, and even while sparring on a training field.

The publication of the Exploration Report caused an explosion in scientific research, as well.

After all, numerous academics who had been stuck in their own research gained priceless new information and a broader context that allowed them to make instant breakthroughs. Others were passionately expanding on the themes and topics touched upon in the Exploration Report — there were already several additional, startling discoveries made, and new ones were coming out every day.

…One mystery the Exploration Report on Everything did not solve, however, was the identity of its author.

Nobody knew who Nobody was.

But everyone wanted to find out.

The discoveries made by this anonymous individual seemed too great and groundbreaking for a single person to make. And yet, all signs pointed to the fact that Nobody was, indeed, a single person — a fact that was almost as astonishing as the contents of their report themselves.

Speculations were abundant, and rumors about Nobody swiftly went

from simply far-fetched to completely ridiculous. Some said that Nobody was Changing Star herself, some pointed to Song of the Fallen, some believed that Nobody was the ghost of a long-dead champion of the First Generation, and some even insisted that Nobody was none other than the Unknown himself.

And that was before people even learned that there was a secret version of the Exploration Report that only those who passed a mysterious trial could gain.

When that piece of information was revealed, for a short while, it seemed as if the whole world became obsessed with searching for Nobody.

Sunny was observing all that in a dazed state. The stir caused by his academic swan song… had gone far beyond his already outrageous expectations.

But that wasn't even the reason for his bewilderment.

'No, but…'

He looked at the daily newspapers published in Bastion. All of them were full of articles and ridiculous insinuations about who Nobody was.

'What the actual hell? How come?!'

How come every persona he created for the sake of anonymity ended up being more famous than he was?

First Mongrel, and now Nobody...

Was he doing anonymity wrong?

Shaking his head, Sunny put the newspapers away.

'Crap. Now I'll actually have to come up with that trial.'

He had sort of assumed that there would be plenty of time to set something up, but that prediction was proving to be woefully incorrect.

Well, it was not too troublesome. Sunny already had experience creating secret trials — the Shadow Clan recruited new members through a similar process. So, he could simply come up with the main points and push it off on Aiko.

Taking a deep breath, he looked down at the sprawling vista of Bastion.

His bewilderment slowly gave way to a wistful mood.

'I wonder…'

The Exploration Report on Everything was merely a small project he poured his mind into in his free time — albeit it was also the culmination of his decade-long pursuit of the truth, and of all the harrowing trials he had survived.

Despite that, Sunny had a strange feeling that even if he became Sacred… or even Divine… this would be the achievement most people would remember him by. Something that would be taught in schools hundreds of years later and become the foundation of common knowledge, and therefore known to everyone, everywhere.

So, it was more than a little bit ironic that nobody knew who Nobody actually was. That Nobody was a man named Sunless.

But maybe it was better that way.

A particular sentence suddenly came to his mind. Sunny looked to the sky and exhaled slowly.

"No one knew where Weaver went and what they did…"

Chuckling quietly, he turned around and went about his business...

As if nothing had happened.

Chapter-2567: Staring Contest

The Exploration Report on Everything had certainly caused quite a stir. Sunny had expected that he would be dealing with the consequences for quite some time… but who would have thought that something else was going to steal the spotlight in a matter of weeks?

Riding across the barren expanse of the Eastern Quadrant, Sunny looked at the sky and let out a wistful sigh.

Mordret was a Supreme now, which meant that from the point of view of the public, he was the second Sovereign of humanity. The news would spread among the population soon, and it was bound to take at least some of the attention away from the Exploration Report. After all, most people were more interested in the happenings of today than they were in ancient history.

Come to think of it…

Sunny's sigh was followed by a quiet groan.

"The King of Nothing."

With a title like that, as well as the timing of his ascent to the throne of Supremacy… Mordret was bound to be mistaken for Nobody, wasn't he?

Sunny remained silent for a while, swaying in the saddle.

Then, he let a chuckle and said with a hint of vindictive amusement in his voice:

"Good… good! Let him draw the fire away for me."

Honestly, the idea of Mordret becoming the protagonist of countless

ridiculous rumors and having his name dragged through the mud by unscrupulous gossip columnists was kind of appealing. The best part, though, was that the bastard would have no idea how he had ended up in that situation… and who was to blame.

Imagining Mordret's expression when crowds of misguided fools kept accosting him improved Sunny's mood a lot.

"Wouldn't it be fun, him attaining Supremacy only to find out that all people want to talk to him about is a research paper written by someone else?"

Knowing Mordret, that would certainly throw him for a loop. Not only because people would keep seeking him out for strange reasons, but also because he had no idea who Nobody truly was, either.

Sunny let out a wicked laugh.

Hearing it, Nightmare looked back and stared at him for a moment, then turned away and let out an absolutely terrifying, chilling neigh.

It seemed like he was expressing solidarity, or simply did not wish to be left out.

Sunny smiled.

"Right? You make a good point, buddy."

Sadly, his horse was not the best conversation partner, so they continued their journey in silence.

And speaking of silence and bad conversation partners…

Sunny's thoughts turned to a different event that had happened soon after he regained his senses.

'Oh, yes. There was that, as well.'

He thought back to a particular day on the Forgotten Shore.

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'Well, this is… interesting.'

A few days after regaining consciousness, Sunny found himself in the underground hall of the Nameless Temple, far away from the bustling streets of Bastion. Granted, the streets of the Dark City were bustling, as well — having been absent for a couple of weeks, he was behind schedule on the reconstruction efforts, so thousands of his shades were currently hard at work.

He was using the simple tasks of preparing the Dark City for potential settlers to get accustomed to how vast his mind had become due to Mind Weave. Before, Sunny could only issue simple commands to his shades — if he wanted something more intricate to be done, he had to actively observe and instruct them. Needless to say, that slowed the work down.

But now, Sunny could observe and instruct countless shades at the same time. So, the pace with which they were cleaning up the Dark City had increased tremendously.

From the simple tasks like clearing the collapsed and unstable buildings to sorting out the rubble and recovering stones that could be used for constructing new ones, from digging pits to lay foundations to laying bricks — he could give thousands of commands at the same time and monitor how the shades performed to correct most mistakes before they happened.

It was dizzying, wondrous… and most of all, far more efficient.

'I'll be able to move on to battle testing soon.'

The Burned Forest awaited.

Before that, however…

Sunny looked around the vast expanse of the dark hall. Eventually, his gaze settled on the two others who were currently in the Nameless Temple with him.

There were two taciturn beauties standing some distance away, far apart… staring at each other.

They were Saint and Slayer, of course.

Sunny could not really say that their gazes were heated — after all, Saint was always aloof and indifferent, while Slayer cast her dark gazes at all living beings as if they were prey — but there was definitely some kind of strange atmosphere in the air.

Sunny considered it for a few moments, then turned his thoughts back to what he had been contemplating before.

Slayer had spent a long time evolving in the dark flames of his soul after killing and consuming the shadow of Condemnation — her evolution only concluded during his venture into the Palace of Imagination. Saint, meanwhile, just finished hers today.

They were both Supreme now.

And that was not all.

Although Saint did not quite become a Tyrant, some of her Attributes have evolved, and she gained a frightening new Ability.

Slayer, meanwhile…

After learning the name of the woman whose shadow she had been from Sunny, she showed a subtle, but poignant reaction. Her gaze grew distant for a short while… and then returned to its usual feral darkness. But something about her was slightly different now.

There was a difference that was unseen and hard to define with words. However, there was also a difference that was quite apparent…

Slayer seemed to have regained her Aspect — or a shadow of her Aspect, at least.

'I am still trying to wrap my head around the implications of her Abilities… of her Transformation Ability, most of all.'

Shaking his head, Sunny turned to the Onyx Saint…

No, not anymore.

He turned to the Jade Saint.

Chapter-2568: Jade Saint

'No matter how I look at it, it's weird.'

It wasn't supposed to be, but it unmistakably was.

Saint's fearsome armor was still as black as the lightless expanse of the Underworld, but underneath it, her smooth stonelike skin had become flawlessly white, like sublime jade.

And although Sunny knew that it was not unreasonable, he just could not get used to the idea of it. Her skin had been grey as the Stone Saint and alabaster white as the Marble Saint… but she had been the Onyx Saint for so long that he grew accustomed to it.

The jade nature of her Supreme body was not the only different thing about Saint's appearance, though. She had returned to her usual height now, but immediately after completing her evolution, Saint was at least ten meters tall, towering above him like a beautiful monument.

He had a suspicion that even that was not the limit of how tall Saint could become as long as she wished to. She had gained the ability to change her size and mass at will after absorbing the essence of one of Mordret's Reflections — now, Sunny knew that Saint could achieve that by using the negative quality of Nothing. And since she had absorbed far more Nothing in the Palace of Imagination, there was no telling what her true height was now.

It was a far cry from the small living sculpture he found on the Forgotten Shore, who had been the same height as he was. For what it was worth, though, Saint herself seemed to prefer her usual height… which was just above Sunny.

'She can weigh as much as a mountain of jade, though.'

Quite literally.

That would, without a doubt, come in handy in battle.

'What am I even thinking about?'

The changes brought about by Saint's evolution went deeper than her appearance, of course.

Sunny summoned her runes, which had already been adjusted with Cassie's help to reflect the current state of Saint.

They read:

Shadow: Jade Saint.

Shadow Rank: Supreme.

Shadow Class: Devil.

Shadow Attributes: [War Master], [Stalwart], [Flame of Divinity], [Heart of Darkness], [Vessel of Nothing].

Two of Saint's Attributes had evolved, and a new one seemed to have appeared.

The [Flame of Divinity] was the simplest. Saint had possessed a spark of it even as an Awakened — now that she was Supreme, that spark had grown into a towering flame.

[War Master], however, was more interesting. It was an evolution of the [Battle Master] Attribute, and from what Cassie could glean, the change was quite intriguing.

The description of the [Battle Master] Attribute read: "Born on the battlefield, the Stone Saint is proficient in all forms of combat."

However, the description of the [War Master] Attribute was different.

Sunny looked to the runes.

[War Master] Attribute Description: "A veteran of countless battlefields, the Jade Saint is proficient in all forms of warfare."

He was not sure what exactly it meant… however, if he was to hazard a guess, the [War Master] had to do with strategy and tactics as opposed to personal combat skill. It was an Attribute fit for a general, not merely a foot soldier.

Which was quite good news, considering that Sunny happened to be in possession of a legion that needed someone to command it.

'We'll have to see about it in the Burned Forest.'

And then, there was the new Attribute, [Vessel of Nothing].

Sunny looked at the runes.

[Vessel of Nothing] Attribute Description: [Nothing dwells in this Shadow's body, granting her the power of annulment.]

It was quite a mysterious description, no doubt. Of course, Sunny had already known what it meant — that Saint had gained a measure of control over Nothing, which allowed her to contain it within herself and make use of it to pursue her goals.

How exactly the ghostly mist could be used, though… apart from her ability to reduce her size and mass, the answer lay in the new Ability she now possessed.

Sunny glanced at Saint, who was still staring at Slayer with indifference, and then turned back to the runes.

Shadow Abilities: [Weapon Sage], [Underworld Armament], [Mantle of Darkness], [Blade of Darkness], [Shield of Nothing].

'Shield of Nothing…'

Sunny concentrated on the new Ability and read its description.

[Shield of Nothing] Ability Description: "Nothing protects this Shadow, and as long as it does, no one can harm her.]

These words were both vague and provocative. The reality of what [Shield of Nothing] did, however, was both less grand than what the description implied… and far more fearsome.

The Shield of Nothing was not a literal shield. Rather, it was a power that Saint wielded now — a field of annulment. And what that field did was deny everyone their own powers when they faced her in combat.

As long as Saint sustained the Shield of Nothing, the Aspects of Awakened and the unholy powers of the Nightmare Creatures, as well as their Attributes — the very things that made them extraordinary — would either be heavily suppressed or outright negated around her.

It was a bit like what Moonveil could achieve as long as she made her target bleed… it was also a bit like the foundation the War Realm had been built upon.

Needless to say, it was a terrifying power. Saint had always excelled in defense, but now, her conservative battle style had reached its culmination — after all, was there a better defense than denying the enemy their offensive ability?

Sunny, for one, would not want to clash with someone like Saint while denied both his Aspect and his Attributes.

Not that there was anyone like Saint out there, in either of the worlds.

And on top of that, she now possessed the strength of a Supreme creature. Her will was also exceptionally strong — strong enough that she had been completely immune to most forms of mind and soul attacks as a mere Awakened.

Sunny smiled.

'I think we will raise hell, the two of us…'

The last change was not written in the runes — rather, it was the lack of runes that had been there before that announced it.

The counter of shadow fragments that used to be at the very end of the field of shimmering runes was gone. It was not replaced by a new one, either — it was simply not there anymore.

Sunny was not sure what it meant, but it seemed like Saint — or any Shadow, perhaps — would not be able to become Sacred through usual means.

That made sense, sadly. Apotheosis was not something one could achieve through quantity, after all. It was the quality that mattered.

Throwing one last look at Saint, Sunny failed to suppress a smile and turned to Slayer.

His smile grew a little strained.

This one had grown quite a bit more powerful, as well…

Chapter-2569: Demon Slayer

Sunny often wondered what powers Orphne of the Nine had wielded. After all, her shadow was already one of the deadliest things he had ever faced without them — it was no coincidence that Sunny called her Slayer. Just how fearsome the original had been?

Orphne was one of the two known beings in all of history who had managed to kill a daemon, after all. The other one was Weaver… and she had killed Weaver. In fact, she had killed Weaver twice, so what did that make her?

To his surprise, though, her Aspect was not at all what he had expected.

Sunny had thought that she would possess an immensely powerful combat Aspect, or at least one focused on death and killing, but that was not the case at all. If anything, Slayer's powers were the antithesis of that — her Aspect was focused on utility, with hardly any combat applications. More than that, at its core, it was an Aspect meant to promote understanding and harmony.

At least that was the impression Sunny had gotten after Cassie transcribed the runes for him.

Of course, the powers Slayer had reclaimed after remembering the name of the woman who had cast her were not entirely the same as Orphne's Aspect had been. After all, Orphne had been a human — Slayer, however, was a shadow creature. Had been a Shadow Creature before Sunny killed her and made her his Shadow, rather…

It was a bit complicated.

'What it is is ridiculous, not complicated.'

He smiled faintly.

Orphne of the Nine had been a mortal woman, and like all mortals, she had a shadow. Shadows traveled to the Shadow Realm after the death of mortals who cast them, but Orphne had descended into the Shadow Realm alive… and died there side by side with the Demon of Fate.

Her shadow remained in the Shadow Realm, but it did not surrender to the laws governing the afterlife and refused to be annihilated. Instead, it roamed the dark expanse of the Realm of the Dead for thousands of years, hunting down other shadows to sustain itself.

Eventually, the feral shadow of Orphne of the Nine became a Shadow Creature. A kind of being who were born from the shadows of the dead, but were distinctly different from them — like Nightmare.

That Shadow Creature was eventually killed by Sunny and turned into one of his Shadows. And his Shadows were all Shadow Creatures themselves, by definition… sort of. They were apparently incomplete, whatever that meant, and were neither mere shadows of the dead nor independent Shadow Creatures.

Sunny winced as if in pain.

'Shadow God was truly a great and awesome god…'

But his naming sense... was outright terrible.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons Sunny had ended up receiving his blessing and becoming a Shadow Slave, as well.

'Wait. If Slayer is the Shadow of a Shadow Creature of a shadow of a mortal woman…'

Then what the hell was Sunny himself?

He made a face, trying to define his own existence.

It seemed that he was a mortal man who had become a Shadow Creature with the help of the Nightmare Spell and a blessing from Shadow God, then killed himself and became a shadow, then made himself into a Shadow Creature once again while attaining Supremacy. Coincidentally, he had once descended into the Shadow

Realm alive, too.

Now, though, no trace of his mortal self remained — he was truly and utterly a creature of shadows, born from the shadow of a dead man.

'Huh.'

In any case, as a Shadow Creature, Slayer did not wield a true Aspect — and neither did she possess a true Flaw. Rather, she wielded powers that were derived from the Aspect of her original source, Orphne of the Nine…

The Godslayer.

The Demon Slayer?

Orphne did not have a title because no one had been alive to tell the tale of her incredible and terrible deeds. She had performed them at the world's end, after all — in fact, it was her hand that had set the end of days in motion.

Few beings could boast of causing the deaths of all the gods and all the daemons with one strike of their blade, but Orphne could.

Which only made the fact that her Aspect had nothing to do with death and combat so much more poignant.

Slayer's first Ability was quite an odd one. It allowed her to understand and communicate with all manner of beasts and living creatures, as well as comprehend human languages — humans were beasts as well, after all. An Ability like that certainly had its uses, and while Sunny had benefited greatly from having learned a few dead languages himself, he… how could he put it?

He would not have wanted to receive an Ability like that as a Sleeper. The world was too violent and cruel a place for a power that only encompassed communication. It was an Ability suited for peace… but life was war.

Slayer's second Ability greatly enhanced all her senses. That one was far more useful, and could explain how she was so eerily accurate

when shooting a bow over vast distances, great at laying ambushes, and almost impossible to catch unaware.

Her third Ability was the only one that could be considered a direct combat one. It allowed her to imbue her attacks with soul essence, making them more potent.

That one… reminded Sunny of Samara and her powerful rifle, so he felt wistful while reading the runes.

'The method is similar, but the result should be different. I will have to watch Slayer fight to understand more.'

Samara's Ability had been straightforward — it allowed her to charge objects with her essence and then convert that essence into kinetic or heat energy. Slayer's Ability, however, was more... mystical. So, he could not immediately understand its nuances.

It was curious, though, that Slayer had not used that power before. She seemed to have retained some measure of her first two Abilities as a feral shadow, but not of the other ones. Now that she had regained more of her former self, though, that was going to change.

And then there was Slayer's fourth Ability…

That one intrigued Sunny the most.

Chapter-2570: Shapeshifter

Slayer's fourth Ability, which corresponded to Orphne's Transcendent one, was simple at first sight. In fact, Sunny could have already guessed what it was, having seen it in the visions bestowed upon him by Ariel's Game.

It allowed her to take the shape of beasts she had seen, heard, smelled, touched, or whose flesh and blood she had tasted. She was a shapeshifter.

Such a Transformation Ability was certainly versatile, and could be a powerful weapon when faced with a certain kind of enemy… but that was not what piqued Sunny's interest.

Instead, it was the fact that Slayer was a being who had existed for thousands of years, and had therefore met and killed a great number of beasts — and the fact that the definition of "beasts" the runes described was quite vague. Their direct meaning was "bestial things", which was not exactly precise.

He had seen her take the form of a hawk, as well as of a fearsome black leopard powerful enough to kill one of the Sacred Spirits of Heart God's forest. Who knew what other shapes she could assume?

Could she turn into a Nightmare Creature?

Most Monsters fit the definition of a bestial thing despite not being Beasts. Humans, meanwhile, were Beasts, but not bestial things… most humans weren't, at least.

What about other kinds of creatures?

Could Slayer take Transcendent Forms of human Saints, as long as they were bestial?

Could she take the shape of mythical beasts?

For example…

Could Slayer turn into a dragon?

Sunny gave her a long look.

It was full of suspicion.

'I'd better keep her away from Kai, just in case…'

He shivered.

'And Nightmare. One hellish horse is enough!'

Slayer ignored his pointed gaze, continuing to stare at Saint with her usual air of cold malice.

Sunny smiled and leaned back.

She had a fifth Ability, as well, although it was unlike those of human Supremes.

Slayer was not a Sovereign, after all, and neither was she a Tyrant. So, she had no Domain and did not rule over anyone.

Her fifth Ability was connected to the very essence of Supremacy, instead — to the Will.

Just like the Supreme Abilities of Sovereigns, it seemed like the extension and culmination of her other powers. It allowed her to clearly sense and understand the Will of other beings, as well as communicate her own better — she could imbue her weapons with her Will in a direct manner, for example, making them that much more deadly.

'It's interesting.'

Slayer's powers, unlike her personality, were more subtle and understated rather than fierce and ferocious. Despite the nature of her Aspect, though, Orphne had been far more deadly than any other

human Sunny knew of, and had achieved far more dreadful feats.

An Aspect was not complete without a person's Attributes, though. It was Slayer's Attributes that made her powers shine… one of them in particular.

Sunny knew that Orphne of the Nine had possessed an Attribute similar to his own… his former greatest benefactor and most terrible foe, [Fated].

However, Slayer did not.

Whether it was because Slayer was not the same being as the original Orphne or because she had already fulfilled her fate, he did not know.

In any case, he was thinking of a different Attribute — an Attribute that seemed to explain the unique composition of her soul, the deadly purity of her battle technique, as well as why she had been able to persist in the Shadow Realm for thousands of years without being consumed by it.

It was called [Pure Soul].

Orphne of the Nine had possessed a pure and unyielding soul that shone with beautiful light and refused to be blemished. That, perhaps, was the source of her tenacious resolve and single-minded determination, as well as why Slayer was always able to be true to herself, both in thought and in action.

And that, in turn, was the reason she had been able to persist in her quest to slay the Demon of Fate until both of them perished, even as the world was coming undone around them. That was also the reason why her soul shone with pure light even after she became a shadow, and why she had been able to withstand the jaws of the Shadow Realm for thousands of years.

That Attribute had a more practical side to it, as well. After all, one of Slayer's powers allowed her to imbue her attacks with soul essence, and her soul essence was similarly pristine — and therefore far more potent. Her Will was pure and sincere, too, and thus could

be expressed more effectively.

'Who could have thought?'

The most accomplished killer in the world was also the most sincere person in the world.

Sunny was not sure if that was deeply fitting or reflected poorly on what kind of world they all lived in.

Regardless of that, he felt lucky that Slayer had not possessed these powers when they fought atop the shadow of Condemnation.

Feeling fortunate to have survived that encounter, he looked between Slayer and Saint with a thoughtful expression.

Sunny was quite curious which of these two Supreme Shadows would win if they were to duel.

His money was on Saint… probably… since her powers lent themselves better to direct combat. Slayer was a fearsome fighter, as well, but she excelled in subterfuge more than she did in direct confrontations — she was first and foremost a huntress, not a warrior.

That said, he could not be sure.

After all, Slayer could simply summon wings and fly high into the sky, then unleash a barrage of arrows at Saint from dozens of kilometers away. If Saint summoned her true darkness to blind her, she could continue to fight by relying on her other senses…

Hell, she could probably shapeshift into a Dark Drifter — the eerie Creature of Darkness Sunny and Slayer had fought in the Shadow Realm — and be just as at home in the embrace of true darkness as Saint was.

Well, that was before Saint raised her Shield of Nothing to negate Slayer's powers.

Sunny was not sure who would win that fight, but he was certainly curious to see.

'I won't be seeing it today, though.'

After all, he was too busy to procure another Citadel.

And even if he did not know how the battle of two Supreme Shadows would end, he knew that it would definitely reduce the Nameless Temple to rubble.

'Some other time, then...'

Chapter-2571: Silent Forge

The heartland of the Eastern Quadrant — if the desolate wasteland could be called that — was gradually changing as Sunny drew closer to the coast. He was almost in the territory controlled by humans now, so Nightmare slowed down a little.

Sunny cast his shadow sense far and wide, guiding them around local settlements, military outposts, and scattered patrols — after all, it would be quite troublesome if the Lord of Shadows had been noticed riding his terrifying steed despite supposedly being dead.

A small sigh escaped from his lips.

The duel between Saint and Slayer had not happened yet. He was a little disappointed, but mostly, he felt content.

Swaying in Nightmare's saddle, Sunny hummed quietly.

'I've gotten quite strong, haven't I?'

He was Supreme, and commanded four Supreme Shadows on top of that — Saint, Slayer, Serpent, and Fiend. Nightmare was bound to attain a higher Rank before too long, as well… even Mimic had become Transcendent.

That was an amount of power far greater than he had ever imagined wielding. The Shadow Legion had grown significantly in the Burned Forest, too, and there were Sacred shades among his silent soldiers now.

Such a terrifying amount of power…

Was the prerogative of a god, not of a mortal man. Denying that would simply be an exercise in futile modesty — after all, he alone was enough to conquer and destroy entire worlds. If that was not

divine, then what was?

'The answer is pretty simple, though.'

Destruction was not what made one divine. Any fool could destroy something built by another. Instead, it was their stunning ability to create that distinguished gods from all other beings, and Sunny was not capable of creating a world.

He was not a stranger to crafting miraculous things, though.

Raising a hand, Sunny briefly touched his chest. Then, he smiled tiredly, remembering the long weeks he had spent in the forge of the Dark City.

That was where he had created a shadowbound Memory of his own, and although the process was so difficult that he was yet to fully recover from its strain, he was quite satisfied with the result.

'Took me long enough…'

And it would have taken him even longer without Mind Weave.

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The great hall of the ruined cathedral was enveloped in silence. That felt strange, considering that the shade of the King of Swords had been hammering here for the past year without ever growing tired.

That was because the Shadow Legion had retreated back into Sunny's soul while he was unconscious and slowly recovering from assimilating Mind Weave.

Sunny did not pay the unfamiliar silence any attention, looking at the model of a vast spellweave spanning the great expanse of the cathedral and reaching all the way to its distant ceiling.

'I think… I am about finished, now.'

This weave had been long time in the making. Sunny had been designing it for around two years, already — he had started thinking about it immediately after forging the Blessing.

Most of the work had been done before his unfortunate fainting spell, but Mind Weave allowed him to solve the final lingering conflicts much faster. Of course, the great weave above him was merely a theory — it was a model created from manifested shadows, so there was no saying if his theoretical design would actually take shape in practice.

But Sunny knew that he would not be more prepared than now any time soon, or maybe ever.

A shadowbound Memory was different from an ordinary one, anyway — it had to be. Its weave had the capacity to grow and learn, so the patterns had to be designed in a completely different way from what he was used to, containing both a rigid structure and a degree of freedom.

Sunny had learned that while creating the Blessing, and after witnessing how the Spell improved upon his design, he felt confident enough to attempt forging a shadowbound Memory of his own.

'No time to waste, then.'

With the threat of the Dreamspawn looming on the horizon and two fragments of Weaver's Lineage left to collect, Sunny felt a bit of urgency.

The vast tapestry of black strings above him rippled and dissolved into a torrent of shadows as he released them from the grasp of Shadow Manifestation. A moment later, two figures stepped out of the darkness, walking toward the forge with determined steps.

They were his own incarnations, of course. One was in the Burned Forest, one was in Ravenheart, while two were south of the Hollow Mountains, with Nephis — so, three pairs of hands were what he had to work with.

Even the Dark Lord of the Forgotten Shore had abandoned his throne to dedicate himself to forging the shadowbound Memory, leaving Aiko to manage the operations of the Shadow Clan alone.

The great anvil of the Shadow Forge was empty, with the shadow of

the King of Swords standing behind it silently. Each of the incarnations placed the materials they had brought on its weathered surface.

The last one landed on the anvil with a metallic ring, finally breaking the silence. Sunny looked down.

There were shadows that had remained forever frozen after the Winter Beast's death.

There was a fragment of polished ivory — a splinter of bone from the colossal Soul Serpent whose bones Sunny had found in the Shadow Realm, and then used to kill Slayer.

There was a spool of Nether's diamond thread he had recovered in the Ebony Tower.

There were strands of black silk woven by the Puppeteer.

And lastly…

There were seven iron rings.

They were not simple rings, of course. Rather, they were links of an ancient chain — the chain Sun God had used to bind Hope, which Sunny had pried away in the Gateway Hall of the Ivory Tower.

One ingredient was still lacking, though.

It was his blood.

Letting a sigh, Sunny looked at the shadow of Anvil and smiled.

"You'd better ready your hammer."

Today, he was going to require some assistance.

Soon enough, fire roared in the forge, and the sound of the hammer striking an anvil resounded in the ancient cathedral once more.

Sunny was crafting a shadowbound charm.

Chapter-2572: Shadowbound

Crafting a shadowbound Memory for himself was both more difficult and easier than forging the Blessing.

It was more difficult because, this time, Sunny was not going to get assistance from the Spell — that was because he was not a carrier of the Spell, and therefore did not enjoy the benefits of bearing its curse.

However, he was also crafting a Memory for himself as opposed to someone else, and so, there was no need to invent complicated tricks to accomplish the desired result. While crafting the Blessing, Sunny had to split the forging process between the real world and Neph's dream — but this time, he could simply enter his Soul Sea and create the weave of his Memory there.

Plus, he had the benefit of having already accomplished a similar feat once.

One of his incarnations worked at the forge with the shadow of Anvil, while two more sat down, crossed their legs, and closed their eyes. It looked as if they were meditating, but of course, they were busy in his Soul Sea instead.

Out of there, in the silent expanse of his lightless soul, they wove a vast and unfathomable pattern out of strings of shadow essence. His seven tenebrous shadow cores burned above them like dark suns, bathing the tranquil expanse of still water in the lack of radiance.

Sunny had discovered something curious while preparing for the forging of this Memory. It was that there was a limit to how many relics could be bound to a person's soul. For most humans, it was just one — most humans only possessed one soul, after all, and it could not accommodate the anchor of more than one weave.

For people like Nephis and Sunny, though, the limit was more

generous… maybe because they were not technically people.

So, Sunny had the rare privilege of binding both the Jade Mantle and the Memory he was going to forge today to himself.

That said, he was not sure if his soul would be able to contain a third. So, he had to pour himself into creating this one fully.

In the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, he crafted the charm from the links of the chain with which Hope had been bound. This time, there was little forging and smelting involved — even if Sunny wanted to, he was not confident in his ability to melt the seven iron rings. Simply removing them from the chain had been a daunting effort, already, having taken all of his power and cunning to succeed.

But luckily, he did not need to alter the shape of the rings or melt them to create an alloy. He was not forging a weapon, after all — he was crafting a charm. So, most of the process involved grounding the fragment of the bone of the primordial Soul Serpent and frozen shadows into fine dust, mixing it with his blood, and then coating the links of the chain with it.

"I am sorry. I don't think you'll be satisfied with our craftsmanship today."

The shadow of the King of Swords did not respond, of course, assisting him silently.

As they coated the iron links with the mixture of frozen shadows, bone, and his blood, Sunny poured his will into the cold metal, willing it to absorb his intent and the essence of death contained in the black liquid. The real forging was happening somewhere where no one could see — his Will was the hammer, and the world was the anvil.

Each clash was far more fearsome and devastating than any physical blow could ever be, sending ripples through the fabric of existence.

Within the dark expanse of his Soul Sea, a grand weave was taking shape around the seven dark suns. Now that Sunny possessed Flesh Weave, the strings of essence could not cut his fingers anymore — so,

each of his incarnations was faster and more efficient in creating the intricate patterns.

His mind had become vast and seemingly boundless, capable of containing the whole design of the weave and all its infinite complexity… and yet, Sunny still felt strained, beads of sweat rolling down his many faces.

'Work, work…'

The design that he had only envisioned was now becoming a reality. He hoped that it would hold, but knew that it could collapse instead — already, several junctions had come undone under the titanic weight of the great weave, and he had to change the pattern on the spot.

The Mind Weave assisted with that, as well, helping him think faster and envision more possible solutions. However, the problems he faced could not be solved simply by thinking fast — he needed creativity, knowledge, and insight more than volume, and those were not affected by Mind Weave.

Still, he had not failed to solve an emerging problem yet.

Time passed slowly, and as it did, he only felt more burdened. He felt tired.

Torrents of shadow essence flowed from his Domain into his soul, and then from his soul into the weave. The clash between his Will and the cold metal of the metal links, as well as the world itself, continued without ever abating. The weave encompassing the dark heavens of his Soul Sea continued to grow and expand, soon filling everything above him.

An hour passed, then a day.

Then, a few more days.

…On the seventh day, a small earthquake shook the Forgotten Shore.

Standing in the throne room of the Dark Castle with a report in hand, Aiko swayed and stomped her leg on the floor.

"Hey, settle down! What are you, suffering from indigestion?"

But the tremors continued, only growing more violent.

Frowning, she drifted into the air and flew to the window. Looking down upon the Dark City, Aiko realized that it was not Mimic's fault — the entire city was quaking.

Her gaze turned to the ruined cathedral.

On a dark square, the members of the Shadow Clan who had been training there were struggling to stay upright. June swayed with the rest of them, then looked at their taciturn instructor with a tense expression. Strangely enough, Saint seemed completely calm, keeping her balance easily as if rooted in the ground.

She was looking in the direction of a tall, magnificent, ruined building that was towering above the surrounding streets in the distance.

In the vast silence of the ruined cathedral, the shadow of the King of Swords took a step back and tilted its head, looking at the seven black rings laying side by side on the incandescent anvil.

On the other side of it, Sunny smiled tiredly and wiped his sweat with a trembling hand.

'It's done.'

He had succeeded.

The runes shimmered in the air in front of him.

They read...

Memory: Curse.

Chapter-2573: The Curse

The tremors stopped, and the vast hall of the ruined cathedral turned silent once again. The anvil, which had become incandescent during the crafting of the Curse, was emanating a red glow and waves of sweltering heat. Dust particles danced in the dim light, glistening like sparks of essence.

Seven iron rings lay on the glowing anvil. Their dull grey surface had turned entirely black now, and apart from silk thread and diamond string coiled tightly around segments of each one, they had no adornments.

The black rings were not connected, either… not yet, at least.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

All three of his incarnations did, rather, exhaling at the same time — the sound of their breath was like the last whisper of forge bellows.

The two incarnations that were seated on the floor opened their eyes and rose. The third one took a step forward and summoned the Jade Mantle. As dark, fearsome armor encased Sunny in an intricate carapace, he extended the clawed fingers of his gauntlet forward and picked up one of the rings.

It lay on his palm, taking most of its surface, glistening bleakly in the red glow of the forge.

He considered it for a long while, then brought it to the center of his breastplate. The ring touched the smooth stonelike surface of the black armor… and was then absorbed by it, coming to rest in front of where Sunny's heart — and Beast Core — were.

The Curse was accepted and absorbed by the Jade Mantle, taking its place in the socket of the Underworld Armament.

As Sunny looked into the distance, studying the runes, his other incarnations each took one of the black rings and fused them into their armor. The remaining four would reach their intended masters soon, too — in the end, each of the seven incarnations of the Lord of Shadows would wield one of them.

The Curse was different from the Blessing, and from the Jade Mantle as well. Sunny had designed it with his Transcendent Ability in mind — it was a compound relic that functioned very similarly to how he himself lived. Each of the seven rings was independently powerful, but their potency was progressively enhanced when two or more were fused together.

Therefore, the Curse reached its ultimate power — and took a step beyond it — when all seven versions of Sunny became one, just as he did.

That was how he had limited it, weaving a conditional flaw into the design of this powerful Memory. That way, the level of power it could reach when proper conditions were met was far greater than it would have been otherwise, making the Curse far more potent than it was supposed to be.

[Bind the relic?]

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

Being able to bind a Memory to one's soul was a wondrous boon… but there was a reverse side to it, as well. A relic bound to a soul was no different from a part of that soul, just as integral as the rest of it. Therefore, if the relic was destroyed, the soul would be hurt — perhaps even irreparably damaged.

The soul was just as bound to the relic as the relic was bound to the soul, so one had to be careful when making that choice. The benefits offered by the relic had to be worth the additional vulnerability it created… it was for a good reason that myths and legends were full of stories about powerful beings who put too much of themselves into a potent artifact, only for that artifact to become their doom.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then took a deep breath and

activated the [Shadowbound Relic] enchantment, fusing the Curse into his soul.

What was the point of having doubts now? He would not have created it if he did not believe in himself and his craftsmanship. He wasn't foolishly seeking to empower himself by relying on a potent relic, either — rather, he sought to express his own power better with its help.

The difference between the two was subtle, but it made all the difference.

Soon, the Handy Bracelet spoke into his ear once more:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

[You have received an Attribute.]

Smiling faintly, Sunny summoned his runes.

Come to think of it, he had not given them any attention for a long while…

The shimmering runes read:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: —

Rank: Supreme.

Class: Titan.

Shadow Cores: [7/7].

Shadow Fragments: [7000/7000].

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Extraordinary Rock], [Endless Spring], [Weaver's Mask], [Shadow Lantern], [Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Weaver's Needle], [Nebulous Mantle], [Handy Bracelet], [Quintessence Pearl], [Definitely Not Me].

Echoes: —

Shadows: [Jade Saint], [Soul Serpent], [Nightmare], [Shadow Fiend], [Marvelous Mimic], [Shadow Slayer].

Attributes: [Lord of Shadows], [Flame of Divinity], [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave], [Flesh Weave], [Soul Weave], [Mind Weave], [Jade Shell], [Fateless], [Curse].

Concentrating on the last Attribute, Sunny read its runes.

Attribute: Curse.

Attribute Description...

[Damnation!]

Sunny stared at the description for some time, then coughed in embarrassment.

To be honest, he had spent an unreasonable amount of time trying to come up with something profound and poetic to write there. The Nightmare Spell had given quite a poignant description to the Blessing, after all — so, Sunny did not want to be outdone.

He had considered profound sayings uttered by gods and daemons, some of the most meaningful moments of his life, and even researched poignant quotes of famous authors from before the Dark Times. But everything he had managed to come up with sounded either hollow or too on the nose.

In the end, frustrated and utterly exhausted, but still failing to decide on a description, he could not stop himself from exclaiming "Damnation!" in a fit of anger.

And after throwing his hands up in the air, he simply went and put that as the description.

After all, that was a curse as well, albeit of a different kind.

'Let's hope no one ever sees these runes.'

Shaking his head in shame, Sunny moved his gaze lower.

There, the runes listed the enchantments of his new Attribute.

Just like the Blessing, the Curse possessed seven enchantments.

They were: [Bound], [Dark Embrace], [Absence of Light], [Mercy of Shadow], [Shadow Flame], [Weakening Curse], and [Chain].

Chapter-2574: Worthless Hindrance

Sunny regarded the runes for a while, thinking.

No matter how he looked at it… he had done well.

'If you don't praise yourself, who will?'

Sunny scoffed and turned away from the glowing anvil, walking outside to enjoy the cool air of the Dark City.

Forging the Curse had been difficult. The true hardship, however, was in imagining what the shadowbound Memory needed to be.

Sunny had always known one thing, at least — that he wanted it to be a charm. The [Underworld Armament] enchantment of the Jade Mantle, which enhanced the effect of any charm slotted into the soulbound armor, had gone unused for too long. That had always gnawed at him a little.

At the same time, Sunny knew that he did not want to rely on external power too much, or better yet at all. That was a path that could offer him great benefits at the moment, but would lead him to a dead end in the long run. His goal was to become a god, after all, and gods did not seek power in potent tools.

They were the power.

So, any charm he would forge had to help him use his own Aspect more effectively, as opposed to gifting him new powers.

Ideally, it had to close any blind spots his own Aspect had as well.

But therein lay the problem… in a way, Sunny's greatest power was

his versatility. He could do a little bit of everything, and do it well — so, his powers did not have any glaring blind spots.

Which was not to say that there weren't any, of course.

For example, he lacked a truly effective tool to deal with large groups of weaker enemies. Nephis could incinerate a vast swarm of lesser Nightmare Creatures with one obliterating explosion, but Sunny would have to kill them all by hand — in the best case, he would send the Shadow Legion into battle instead.

There were other instances like that, too.

So, the set of enchantments he had designed for the Curse was meant to make up for his few minor deficiencies, as well as make his strengths even more pronounced.

The [Bound] enchantment was self-explanatory — it was the core enchantment of every soulbound or shadowbound Memory, allowing it to grow alongside its Master. Both the Jade Mantle and the Blessing possessed the same one, as well.

Things got more interesting when it came to the other six enchantments, though.

The Curse had two states — a passive one and an active one. It could be summoned independently, but ideally, the Curse would only become active when Sunny summoned the Jade Mantle, and therefore always be augmented by the [Underworld Armament] as a result.

The [Dark Embrace] enchantment was the only one that functioned when the Curse was in its passive state. It was a nurturing enchantment that enhanced the power of the dark flames of his soul by drawing on his spirit essence. As a result, the flames repaired the damaged shades and wounded Shadows faster, allowing them to return to battle sooner.

It also gave him the ability to soothe the pain of living beings by touching them. Shadow God was also the god of solace, after all… as well as death. So, Sunny had designed a pattern that he called the

[Pain Killer], and wove it into the broader weave of the [Dark Embrace].

If he was honest with himself, though, that part of the enchantment had taken him a great amount of time and effort to complete — more time and effort, perhaps, than what the [Dark Embrace] was mainly supposed to accomplish, even.

His reason was easy to discern, of course. There was a particular person whose pain Sunny wanted to soothe, even if she had never asked for it and would never seek relief from that burden herself.

Nephis might have learned to endure the torment of her Flaw, but Sunny was not willing to watch her endure it. So, he hoped that she would find some measure of solace, at least in his embrace.

The other five enchantments of the Curse could only be used in its active state.

The [Absence of Light] was the most straightforward. It was an altered version of the enchantment he had designed in Ariel's Game to create the Evening Star — a charm Memory that now belonged to Saint.

The [Evening Star] empowered Saint when she was surrounded by darkness. The darker her surroundings were, the greater augmentation she received. The [Absence of Light] had a similar function, but the condition set for it was not connected to how dark it was around Sunny, but rather to how deep the shadows around him were.

The difference was subtle, but impactful. Shadows were created by the absence of light, after all, and were often darker, deeper, and most stark when a powerful source of light was nearby. So, the [Absence of Light] would not grant Sunny any power in true darkness — however, it would empower him when surrounded by mundane darkness or stark shadows and radiant light instead.

[Mercy of Shadow] was the key enchantment of the Curse. It was straightforward in its function, as well, but while that function granted Sunny a powerful boon in and of itself, its true purpose was

to work in tandem with two other enchantments of the shadowbound charm.

The [Mercy of Shadow] enhanced the Death quality of his will. It made Sunny more lethal through no other means than lethality itself.

In that regard, it was similar to the [Slaying Blade] Ability of Serpent. However, while the result was the same, the cause was different.

Serpent was able to suppress and partially ignore the Will of powerful beings that were cut by its blade. The [Mercy of Shadow], however, enhanced Sunny's own will to kill.

The true beauty of it all was the chilling synergy between the two. With the enemy's Will bypassed and Sunny's own Death Will made more tyrannical, the gap between the two grew that much wider.

So, the combination of the [Slaying Blade] and [Mercy of Shadow] truly made him an incarnation of death… Death Incarnate.

That was not the only synergy Sunny had in mind while designing the Curse, though.

The [Shadow Flame] enchantment was an elegant one. It drew inspiration from Neph's Soul Flame, but not in an obvious way.

Sunny and Nephis were similar in the sense that they could augment themselves or their weapons with their Dormant Ability. However, the mechanism of their augmentations differed in one subtle, but important way.

Sunny possessed seven shadows, while Nephis possessed a single reservoir of soul flame. Therefore, the augmentation Sunny could grant was divided into seven parts, while Neph's could be divided freely in any proportion. She could pour all of her flame into making herself stronger, keep one third of it for herself and pour everything else into her weapon…

Or even divide it into a million weaker boons, sharing it with a million people bound to her Domain.

Sunny could not do that. But with the [Shadow Flame], he could — and that would allow him to empower not only himself, but also his Shadow Legion.

Of course, dividing the augmentation of his seven shadows between a million shades would not make each individual shade that much stronger. A few thousand elites, though? That could make all the difference.

That was especially true because the gap between Ranks grew exponentially. So while a thousand Transcendent shades would not benefit much from receiving one thousandth of Sunny's augmentation, a thousand Awakened shades would benefit tremendously.

Sunny had high hopes for the [Shadow Flame].

It had another use, as well — one tied closely to the next enchantment of the Curse.

The [Weakening Curse] was what had given the shadowbound charm its name. Its function was quite simple — which was not to say that designing its elegant weave had been simple. In fact, that single enchantment had taken all of Sunny's ingenuity to create.

But the result was worth it.

The [Weakening Curse] reversed the effect of his Dormant Ability.

Instead of wrapping his shadows around himself, his Memories, his Shadows, or his shades to augment them… it allowed him to wrap them around his enemies to sap their power away.

Chapter-2575: The Chain

[Weakening Curse] allowed Sunny to do the exact opposite of what he was supposed to be capable of. His Dormant Ability, [Shadow Control], was the reason why his invaluable shadow helpers could augment him — or things that belonged to him, as well as those beings who belonged to his Domain.

Similarly, while the [Weakening Curse] was active, beings held in their cold embrace of his shadows would become weaker. Naturally, the effect was cumulative, and just as Sunny gained progressively more power when several shadows augmented him, his enemies would lose progressively more of their own when more than one shadow wrapped itself around them.

There were situations where making the enemy weaker was more beneficial than making oneself stronger. Deciding which action was of more use in a particular battle would require careful consideration, no doubt — and there was the question of safety, as well. Embracing the enemy was not the safest tactic in most cases, after all.

Even without the potential danger of branding a deadly foe with the [Weakening Curse], the utility of this enchantment seemed situational at best, though... and questionable at worst — at least compared to what Sunny could do naturally.

However, there were two reasons why the [Weakening Curse] was actually far more dreadful a power than it seemed.

First was the [Underworld Armament]. The second was its synergy with the [Shadow Flame] and the [Mercy of Shadow].

[Shadow Flame], [Mercy of Shadow], and the [Weakening Curse]...

These three enchantments each possessed its own value, but they were really designed to work together.

[Shadow Flame] allowed Sunny to share the augmentation of his shadows among a great number of targets. Therefore… it also allowed the [Weakening Curse] to affect a great number of victims.

Who was to say that he could only curse seven foes, or one powerful adversary seven times over?

With the [Shadow Flame] and the [Weakening Curse] working in tandem, he could rob thousands of enemies of their strength — tens of thousands of them or even millions, if he wished to.

And that was not all.

Sunny and his shadows were inseparable, and each of them was a conduit of his will. So, all beings augmented or weakened by them were connected to him — and he could use that connection to channel his Death Will into them.

Which, of course, would itself be empowered by the [Mercy of Shadow].

And all of it — the augmentation of the [Shadow Flame], the insidious hex of the [Weakening Curse], and the merciless finality of the [Mercy of Shadow] — would be augmented by the [Underworld Armament], as well.

In other words, if Sunny decided to share the augmentation of his shadows with a thousand shades, the boon they would receive would be greater than his own. And if he decided to weaken a thousand Nightmare Creatures, the sum of power they lost would be greater than what he would have received.

His Death Will would be greatly enhanced, as well…

So much so that his killing intent would be actually fatal to creatures of lesser Ranks — much like a distant echo of Nether's killing intent had almost killed Sunny once upon a time, in the eye of the storm on the Great River.

Nephis could wipe out a swarm of Nightmare Creatures with one powerful explosion.

With the chilling synergy between the [Shadow Flame], the [Weakening Curse], and the [Mercy of Shadow], though, Sunny did not need an explosion.

He could simply wish the creatures dead, and their lifeless bodies would fall to the ground.

Granted, one of Neph's obliterating explosions would still be more destructive. But Sunny could put on quite a respectable show as well, now — that was the solution he had come up with to make up for the most glaring blind spot of his otherwise supremely versatile Aspect.

'Quite fitting for someone who calls himself the Sovereign of Death, is it not?'

Looking at the dark splendor of the ancient city that sprawled in front of him, Sunny smiled faintly.

For some reason, at that moment, he finally felt like a demigod. The things he could achieve with the Curse were not really more impressive than what he could already do, just different. However, the ability to kill someone by simply looking at them and wishing them dead felt distinctly beyond the mortal realm. It was something that only those who were more divine than mortal were supposed to be capable of.

Of course, Sunny could probably achieve something similar already, albeit on a smaller scale. It was just that he had never had a reason or wanted to unleash the full force of his Death Will upon mundane people, and someone like him had few opportunities to face Nightmare Creatures of the lower Ranks.

Sunny sighed.

'I only ever fight things that are unreasonably powerful…'

Granted, he was an unreasonably powerful thing himself, as well.

And finally, there was the last enchantment of the Curse…

The [Chain.]

It was as much of a utility enchantment as it was the ultimate one. The [Chain] was what made the Curse a compound Memory — now Attribute — and allowed the seven links to enhance each other when combined into a single chain.

The passive effect of the [Chain] allowed the power of the Curse to grow steadily as Sunny augmented himself with his shadows. However, it could only be truly activated when all seven of his incarnations fused into one, and when all seven links were combined together.

Once activated, the [Chain] produced a resonance between individual links, making the sum of their power greater than its parts — all enchantments of the Curse received a fearsome boost, making it even more dreadful.

The [Chain] had a secondary function when activated, as well.

It could be manifested and used to bind something — or someone.

In this state, the [Chain] embodied the concept of permanence.

Therefore, it could be used both offensively and defensively.

It could be used, for example, to bind a powerful enemy in place.

However, it could also be used to bind Sunny himself, thus pinning a snapshot of his existence to the fabric of reality. No matter how his body was mangled afterward while the [Chain] was active, it would return to the shape it had been before.

The same went for his soul, spirit, and mind.

So if he had to use Shadow Dance and felt like losing himself in the process… in theory, the [Chain] would be able to bring him back.

It could be a tether that bound Sunny to himself, as well, at least until he found a way to regain his True Name. That was what he was hoping for — however, as with all things having to do with concepts and higher planes of existence, the actual result was hard to predict. It was a bit of a mystery even for the person who had woven the enchantment.

Nevertheless, Sunny felt a strange affection for the [Chain].

His existence had become quite vague and ephemeral ever since all traces of him were erased from reality. He was not attached to the world by the strings of fate anymore, and the delicate tethers of human connections he had created were now tenuous at best. Nothing chained him to the world…

So, the [Chain] could do that instead. It was a tool with which he could root himself firmly into the fabric of existence, and therefore not feel like he could be dispelled by a gust of wind like a fragile mirage.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Sunny smiled and dismissed the Jade Mantle, thus allowing the Curse to disappear into his soul.

After years of planning and meticulously developing the design of the astonishing weave, he had finally created his own shadowbound relic…

He had created the Curse.

Whistling a simple melody, Sunny headed for the Dark Castle.

'All things considered… I think it went well.'

Now, all he wanted to do was rest.

Chapter-2576: Rat Problem

Sunny did get some rest after crafting the Curse — most of his incarnations did, at least. A few more remained busy with other endeavors, handling tasks that never seemed to stop.

Sunny had to admit — for a dead man, he was quite busy.

One of his incarnations was setting up a base of operations in Ravenheart, for example. Another was developing spells meant to guard the Citadels of humanity with Cassie.

And lastly…

Just a day or two before Mordret rose to the throne of Supremacy, one of Sunny's incarnations led the Shadow Legion into a decisive battle against the Black Millipede tribe.

Out there, far north of the Dark City, the great tangle of the Burned forest sprawled beneath the ashen sky. The charred mass of fallen trees was frothing and seething as it expelled a constant flood of something that looked like a black liquid from afar — it was not a liquid at all, though.

Instead, the black flood consisted of countless chitinous bodies that crawled from underneath the broken trees like an unceasing torrent. Now that the battle moved close to the nests of the Black Millipede tribe, its six remaining queens threw everything they had into resisting the sinister invader, fighting for each meter of land with chilling cunning and ferociousness.

Today, however — like every day for the last few weeks — the deadly flood of monstrous millipedes had met its match.

That was because a different plague had been spreading across the vast expanse of the charred tangle, hidden from view in its depths.

The Burned Forest was suffering from a rat infestation.

At first, there had been a single rat… the shadow of a rat, even. However, that one rat was no mere rat — it was the king of all rats, no less, in all its Sacred glory.

The Rat King had spread like a plague in the weeks after Sunny first summoned him to the Burned Forest, consuming the black millipedes slain by the Shadow Legion and gnawing on the blackened forest itself when there were none to devour. Once the number of rats grew enough, the Sacred shade became capable of tearing them apart all by itself… which only increased the rate of its growth.

By now, the flood of the monstrous millipedes was almost dwarfed by the seething ocean of rat bodies scurrying along the charred branches and broken tree trunks of the great tangle. It was as if two vile tidal waves collided in the middle of the Burned Forest, unleashing a terrible cacophony of bestial screeches and visiting an unimaginable level of violence upon the world.

An incalculable number of rats were torn apart by sharp mandibles, crushed by slithering chitinous bodies, and dissolved in powerful acid. At the same time, countless millipedes were shredded with tiny teeth, buried under a mass of vermin, and devoured from the inside.

Sunny grimaced as he observed the battle from the towering remains of a burned tree, playing with a single rat that kept trying to bite his fingers off.

'What a distasteful sight.'

There was a dark smile playing on his lips.

The Rat King was growing, which was good news — even if the strain of sustaining its existence was draining his reserves of essence more and more. Shades of his own Rank or those who were weaker than Sunny provided him with more spirit essence than what was required to summon them, but Sacred shades were different.

Calling them forth from the dark expanse of his Soul Sea was strenuous both for his Will and his essence, so he could only manage

summoning one.

But the Rat King was worth it here, in the Burned Forest, where it had an almost endless amount of relatively weaker enemies to feed on — not only because the number of rats constantly grew, but because it meant killing two birds with one stone.

When the Rat King devoured black millipedes, its power increased. At the same time, the shades of the devoured millipedes joined the Shadow Legion, making it stronger as well.

That was why the conquest of the southern outskirts of the Burned Forest was going even faster than Sunny had anticipated, despite the weeks of his absence.

The Millipede Queens would not have allowed him to get this close to their nests if they were not struggling.

Still… he had not won a battle yet.

Each time the Shadow Legion advanced, it suffered a crushing defeat and had to retreat. Then, Sunny was forced to wait days until his shades were mended while escaping the pursuit of the Great Tyrants of the Black Millipede tribe, who had long understood that there was only one way to destroy the silent invaders — it was to kill and devour their lord.

If only these poor creatures knew that there were six others just like him where he came from…

Their struggle was hopeless.

The Shadow Legion rose from the darkness over and over again, no matter how many times it was destroyed and wiped out. Worse still, it returned stronger and more numerous every time — after all, the millipedes who had fallen in each of the battles or had been consumed by the Rat King joined the ranks of the silent shadows.

By now, the Ember Queen — the shade of the Great Tyrant of the Black Millipede tribe — ruled more members of their monstrous kind than any one of her six remaining sisters did.

Sunny inhaled deeply as he watched the tide of rats slowly drowning in the ocean of millipedes. The Rat King was struggling, it seemed…

Far in the distance, the elusive forms of the six Millipede Queens were hidden behind the seething mass of their harrowing children.

'It's time.'

He looked around, suddenly missing the company of his other incarnation. Now that Sunny was alone, there was nobody for him to talk to, even.

Of course, talking to his other incarnations was no different from talking to himself, so he could just do that.

He sighed.

"...Godspeed."

With that, Sunny turned into a shadow.

His shadow grew, enveloping the world…

And then, a tenebrous army rose from it.

Chapter-2577: Encroaching Shadows

The Black Millipede tribe might have surrendered a lot of ground to Sunny and his Shadow Legion, but it was still numerous and fearsome… beyond fearsome, in fact, for almost anyone except him.

There was an endless sea of Corrupted Nightmare Creatures, six Great Tyrants, and a deadly retinue of their powerful champions — Great Devils and enormous Demons alike, their glossy black chitin decorated with vivid and eerie patterns. There were Monsters, as well, some of them dozens of meters long.

This harrowing force was enough to wash over Earth and consume every human populating its dying expanse. The Black Millipede tribe was far more terrible than the entirety of the Nightmare Creatures unleashed upon the world by the Chain of Nightmares in and of itself — except for the final few Gate Guardians, perhaps. But even then, the Millipede Queens had numbers on their side.

Sunny was facing the monstrous tribe alone.

It was no coincidence that the Shadow Legion had suffered countless bitter defeats, and that even his own Shadow Shell had been destroyed by these sinister abominations more than a few times.

However, it did not matter. Sooner or later, the Black Millipede tribe was going to become a part of the Shadow Legion, and their long string of victories would ultimately conclude with a final defeat.

Sunny was just not sure that it would happen today.

While the Rat King clashed with the great swarm of monstrous millipedes, the Legion of Death rose from Sunny's shadow. Saint appeared first, riding atop Nightmare. She regarded the scene of

unimaginable violence with cold indifference, then raised her tenebrous sword and hit it twice against the rim of her shield.

As if to answer, a sea of shadows rose from the darkness and surged forward.

Then Shadow Legion split into two wings as it advanced.

The left wing was commanded by Saint, who led the original shades into battle. Behind her were the shade of Daeron the Serpent King and his daughter, Wind Flower, the Snow Wolves of Ariel's Game, the Asuras of Condemnation and other Supreme shades earned by Sunny in Godgrave, the shades of seven Song Saints he had slain, twin shadows of Solvane, the powerful shades of those abominations he had killed in Antarctica, and others.

Most of them were armed and armored by the dark weapons forged by the shadow of the King of Swords.

The towering figure of blackened steel and infernal flame that was Fiend followed Saint into battle, as well. Serpent was also with her, flowing across the charred tangle like a river of onyx scales.

The right wing of the Shadow Legion was a flood of black chitin, composed of numerous millipede shades. It was controlled by the Ember Queen, her ethemeral form hidden behind the seething mass of her monstrous soldiers. Slayer rode on the carapace of the elusive Supreme Tyrant, surrounded by wisps of ghostly fog.

The Shadow legion spread into a wide formation, moving past the dreadful slaughterhouse of the clash between the Rat King and the vast swarm of the monstrous millipedes.

The six Great Tyrants moved their reserve forces, as well, sending the elites and champions of their grotesque kind to contend against the advancing shadows — otherwise, the great army of their abominable tribe would be pincered and eventually surrounded, suffering terrible losses and losing the ability to retreat if need be.

Nightmare rushed forward, covering hundreds of meters with each leap. The aura of dread surrounding him made the slithering

millipedes cower, and Saint raised her sword, ready to reap their lives…

Before she could, however, the Burned Forest was suddenly drowned in blinding light. Sunny felt the shadows shift and retreat, washed away by the beautiful radiance — then, the roar of a devastating explosion rolled across the charred tangle, and a powerful shockwave sent clouds of ash flying into the sky.

Directing his attention to the right flank of the battlefield, Sunny saw countless millipedes dissolving into a cold silver light.

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

[You have slain a…]

Standing atop the beautiful chitin of the Ember Queen, Slayer lowered her bow and regarded the devastation she had unleashed with dark malice. Moments before, she had poured her pure soul into the head of her arrow and let it fly — it was as if a falling star streaked across the ashen sky and landed in the carnage, obliterating both millipedes and the scurrying rats alike in the explosion of essence.

So, the first kill of the battle was hers.

Saint turned her head, as if looking at the murderous Shadow across the vast distance of the battlefield. Slayer gave her a glance, as well... then calmly reached for another arrow.

A moment later, Saint and Nightmare were among the millipedes. Her black blade lashed out, severing several monstrous abominations in half, while his hooves trampled a few more.

The two armies collided, causing the entire world to quake.

Fiend let out a bellowing roar, plunging into the mass of millipedes like a giant made of sharp steel and flame. Despite his enormous size, many of the elder abominations dwarfed him — their impregnable chitin parted under his claws, though, and plumes of smoke rose from

the cracks in their carapaces, hinting that the grotesque horrors were beings burned from the inside.

Serpent clashed with a colossal Great Devil, coiling around its long body and constricting it until the black carapace cracked, and a great flood of fetid blood was expelled from its maw.

The Shadow Wolves descended upon the monstrous millipedes with the wild ferocity of primal predators. King Daeron led the shadows of the human Saints into a deadly assault, the frigid winds raised by the shade of the Winter Beast howling as they froze and stiffened the bodies of the frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

The battle entered a dreadful state of utter mayhem, with annihilating forces being unleashed by both armies to grind the other army to dust.

Observing the carnage from a distance, Sunny remained calm.

'It seems to be going well…'

Chapter-2578: Tipping the Scales

The right wing of the Shadow Legion, composed of slain millipedes, was more numerous than the left wing by now. However, while the millipede shades possessed great numbers and a startling amount of raw power, they had fewer exalted champions among their ranks. So, the situation at the opposite flanks of the battlefield was about even.

Saint and Slayer seemed to be competing to see which one of them could slay more foes, though. As far as Sunny could tell, the results were far from conclusive.

But both of them were terrors to behold.

'They are both doing well, too.'

Saint had assumed her true size, towering at ten meters of height and wielding a similarly great blade. She was surrounded by a flowing whirlpool of true darkness, so Sunny could only occasionally catch glimpses of her.

The shades under her command seemed to be fighting with a greater cohesion than the millipede shades under the Ember Queen's control, and she kept the frontline stable by dashing here and there atop Nightmare, steadily pushing against the profane flood of monstrous abominations.

Nightmare had changed in size to fit her new height, as well, becoming just as daunting to behold. In truth, that was no surprise — the tenebrous steed had been doing just that while carrying Saint all along, albeit on a more modest scale. He was a Shadow Creature, after all, and shadows were inherently shapeless…

So, Sunny had a feeling that Nightmare took the shape of a horse by

choice, not because it was inherently his form. Because of that, his size was merely a formality.

'Come to think of it…'

Observing the battle, Sunny allowed a minuscule fraction of his vast mind to get distracted for a moment.

He knew that Slayer was a Shadow Creature born from the shadow of a mortal woman who had cast it once, a long time ago.

What kind of creature had cast Nightmare, then?

Sunny did not know, but in all his life, he had never met another creature wielding power over dreams. So, the original source of Nightmare must have been a singular existence — it had to be, to have cast such a shadow.

'Focus.'

Sunny told himself to focus… but really, he was not sure that there was a need. He was capable of concentrating on countless things now, and there was no lack of attention he was paying to the raging battle.

In fact, he was utterly devoted to experiencing and perceiving it in as much detail as he could.

This was no ordinary battle, after all — this was the first major battle he fought after acquiring Mind Weave. Therefore, Sunny was experimenting and testing himself, trying to see how far he could stretch the limits of his mind.

At the moment, he was commanding thousands of shades at the same time. There was a certain gap between the speed with which he issued commands and the time it took the shades to comprehend and execute them, so he was slowly moving toward finding a flawless cadence… but generally, the combat effectiveness of the Shadow Legion had increased tremendously.

It was not a disorganized mob of individual shades anymore. Instead, his silent soldiers fought like an actual army… a new and

inexperienced army, perhaps, but a cohesive military force nonetheless.

It was especially true because Sunny had two intermediaries helping him control the shades. Saint and the Ember Queen both served as conduits of his will and the generals of the Shadow Legion, lightening his burden and making his army respond better to his attempts to command it.

There was still room for improvement, though.

'Saint is not quite there, yet.'

The taciturn Shadow was a truly fearsome presence on the battlefield, both because of her Supreme Rank and the Evening Star, which was being augmented by her own Underworld Armament. The black millipedes seemed to melt under her blade, and several of their champions had already been slain by the graceful jade knight…

But although she possessed the [War Master] Attribute now, she lacked the means of effectively communicating her authority to her soldiers — that would probably follow when she became a Tyrant.

The Ember Queen, meanwhile, could only command members of her monstrous tribe... which, needless to say, was a severe limitation.

'I think I have an idea of how to solve that problem.'

That would have to wait until the next time, though.

For now, the Shadow Legion was performing well enough — it was even better than Sunny had expected. In the past, the millipede shades would be obliterated in a matter of minutes, and the rest of the legion would soon follow… but this time, his silent soldiers were holding ground, giving the enemy as much hell as they were receiving.

Even with the Rat King being slowly overwhelmed, the outcome of the battle seemed to be hanging in fragile balance — which was a far cry from the countless defeats Sunny had suffered.

'The difference is impossible to miss.'

Now, he only needed to give the Shadow Legion a little push to break the balance in its favor.

Stepping through the shadows, Sunny appeared in the very middle of carnage, next to Nightmare and Saint. He wrapped himself around the taciturn Shadow, took a mental breath…

And activated the Curse.

The [Absence of Light] activated first, albeit it did not grant him much power due to the true darkness unleashed by Saint — but that was alright. Sunny did not need personal strength at the moment.

The [Shadow Flame] activated next, allowing him to transfer a measure of his augmentation to any number of beings.

Then came the [Weakening Curse], branding the shadows of surrounding millipedes and draining off their strength.

A moment later, the [Mercy of Shadow] poisoned their spirits with his Death Will.

And finally, the [Underworld Armament] of the Jade Shell empowered the Curse, making each of its effects more pronounced.

A vast swathe of the Black Millipede swarm reeled. Countless abominations suddenly seemed slower, weaker, and less tireless than before — many of those who had already been severely wounded simply fell to the ground, lifeless, the profane flames of their souls snuffed out by his killing intent.

Of course, there were simply too many millipedes crawling across the charred surface of the great tangle for the Curse to put a dent into their astonishing collective power…

But it was just enough to break the stalemate and tip the scales of battle into the Shadow Legion's favor.

And once Sunny gained that foothold, he could not be stopped.

Chapter-2579: Long Time Coming

Sometimes, great things had small beginnings.

The dark ocean of hungry rats infesting the Burned Forest had begun from a single beast, for example. Sunny himself, the Lord of Shadows, had been an orphan in the outskirts of NQSC once. A devastating rockfall could be caused by a single rolling pebble.

Similarly, the Curse did not immediately vanquish the Black Millipede tribe. In fact, its effect was not that significant when compared to the collective might of their profane kind — there were simply too many of them, and even the awesome power of a Supreme Titan was not sufficient to quell the monstrous swarm.

However, if used at the right time and in the right place, it was enough to make a difference.

Saint and the elites who followed her were facing the most fearsome champions of the Black Millipede tribe and the horde of lesser abominations who followed them.

The [Mercy of Shadow] poisoned the souls of the Nightmare Creatures with the Death Will — those of them who were weak and already wounded simply fell lifeless to the ground, creating gaps in the flood of abominations. Those who were too powerful to succumb to the killing intent of the Sovereign of Death still felt the cold grasp of his lethal authority, losing some of their vitality.

Then, they were branded by the Weakening Curse and lost some of their power, as well.

Both enchantments, as well as the [Shadow Flame] that allowed them to spread across the swarm of abominations, were naturally

empowered by the [Underworld Armament] as well.

That was enough for Saint and her elites to push their advantage and bring several dreadful Great Nightmare Creatures down in quick succession. Once the pillars of the millipede swarm's offensive in that section of the battlefield fell, an entire swath of the abominable flood collapsed under the eerily silent advance of the Shadow Legion.

The louder the monstrous millipedes screeched and growled, the quieter the merciless shades seemed to become. The abominations died all the same.

And the more of them died, the more shades there were to continue the slaughter.

That small victory swiftly snowballed into a complete collapse of the Black Millipede swarm. The breach in their slithering mass allowed Saint to cut deep into the vast sea of abominations and attack other powerful champions from the flanks while her soldiers pushed the advance from the front. Before too long, these Great Nightmare Creatures fell like dominoes, as well.

And soon after they fell, the entire western flank of the millipede swarm fell apart. The left wing of the Shadow Legion advanced, slaughtering countless abominations and threatening to encircle those of them who were battling the Rat King from the west.

If the center of the millipede swarm fell, its eastern third would find itself being attacked by Slayer and the Ember Queen from the south while Saint and her forces descended upon them from the west.

It would be utter devastation for the Black Millipede Tribe.

More importantly than that, Saint could choose to bypass the remaining two-thirds of the great swarm entirely and instead push north, where the Millipede Queens and their dreadful bodyguards were hiding behind the endless ranks of their revolting army.

...In the very heart of the slaughter, the corpses of the slain millipedes had formed a tall hill. With the battle still raging around it, Nightmare tore his way to the top of that hill and froze there for a

few moments, blood dripping from his fangs as his eyes burned with terrifying crimson flames.

Saint sat in his saddle, regarding the scene of unimaginable carnage with cold indifference. She studied the mayhem around them and then cast her tenebrous gaze into the distance, where the elusive forms of the Millipede Queens were hidden behind the sea of abominations.

Her gaze seemed to carry the promise of death in it.

Somewhere else on the battlefield, Fiend took a deep breath and then leaned forward while opening all four of his arms wide. A great torrent of roaring flames exploded from his infernal maw, incinerating hundreds of lesser millipedes and melting their black chitin into sludge.

Not too far from him, Serpent had assumed the form of the Ember Queen, sowing confusion in the ranks of the millipedes. The elusive form of the great abomination was immediately besieged by countless foes, but escaped their claws and mandibles by hiding in the fleeting moment between the present and the future.

A Great Demon fell, brought down by the twin shadows of Solvane. Someplace else, King Daeron and the shadows of Song Saints were surrounded by a vast field of shattered black chitin. The Shadow Wolves and the Asuras of Condemnation were rampaging in the reeling swarm...

On the other side of the battlefield, Slayer had leapt into the mass of monstrous millipedes and assumed the form of the Wolf. Her jaws snapped, tearing the throat of a gargantuan Great Devil open, and then a chilling howl rolled across the battlefield, drowning out its deafening clamor for a few haunting moments.

'What will they do?'

Seeing the world through Saint's eyes, Sunny regarded the distant forms of the six Great Tyrants.

The Millipede Queens seemed to linger for a while, observing the

horrifying carnage in front of them. Their monstrous children were dying in scores every moment, and the losses were only continuing to mount...

Finally, a strange ripple spread through the abominable swarm.

Acting as one, the countless millipedes dove into the cracks between the blackened branches of the fallen trees, receding into the depths of the tangle like a frothing sea of black chitin.

The Black Millipede Tribe was retreating.

'Aaahhh...'

Sunny extricated himself from Saint and stepped onto the surface of the morbid hill of slain abominations, watching the swarm recede with an arrogant expression.

He closed his eyes for a few moments, and then inhaled deeply.

Finally…

Finally!

After more than a year of war, the Black Millipedes had suffered their first defeat. And after suffering defeat for more than a year, he finally achieved the first victory.

The first, but not at all the last.

Chapter-2580: Inevitable Defeat

It had taken Sunny more than a year to defeat the Black Millipede tribe on the battlefield for the first time.

But after that first victory, it only took him a week to bring their vile kind close to extinction.

Such was the sinister nature of the Shadow Legion — it grew stronger every time it was defeated, and it grew even more after a decisive victory. A great number of monstrous millipedes, including some of their most powerful champions, had fallen in that last battle… and all of them fought under his banner now.

Even if shades of the Supreme and higher Ranks did not possess the Will and were therefore not as powerful as the beings who had cast them, it was still an obstacle that the wounded Black Millipede tribe could not overcome anymore. After all, the very reason they lost the battle was that the Shadow Legion had grown to a point where they could not defeat it.

Perhaps if the Millipede Queen had committed to an all-out offensive and entered the battle themselves, they could have still reversed the result. But even then, it would have only postponed the inevitable.

Perhaps there were creatures deeper in the Burned Forest who could permanently erase shades from existence or possessed unholy powers to counter the Shadow Legion in some kind of way... but the Black Millipedes simply did not possess such tools.

So, they were doomed.

Sunny spent a few days after the battle recovering the soul shards from the corpses of the millipedes — finally! — and waiting for the destroyed shades to be mended in the lightless flames of his soul. The [Dark Embrace] enchantment of the Curse accelerated the process,

allowing his army to be restored faster, so he did not have to wait as long as usual.

In the meantime, Slayer was secretly tracking the retreating swarm to its nests. She moved unseen, using her keen senses and Transcendent Ability to stalk the retreating swarm from a distance — and that was how the Millipede Queens themselves revealed the location of their nests to Sunny, painting targets on the map.

Once the Shadow Legion recovered most of its strength, he led his army north, wrapped around Saint and riding Nightmare at the head of a vast river of rats. In truth, Sunny was glad to leave the battlefield behind — albeit it made recovering the soul shards much easier, watching the Rat King feast on the dead millipedes for days on end was quite a revolting sight.

The Black Millipede tribe tried to defend its territory fiercely despite the hopelessness of their struggle. The Millipede Queens attempted to battle the Shadow Legion a few more times, but every clash ended in their decisive defeat, each one more devastating than the last.

When frontal battles proved to be impossible to win, they switched to different tactics, staging fierce ambushes and embroiling Sunny and his shades in countless small-time skirmishes. That strategy proved to be more troublesome, but still failed to stop his advance.

In all honesty, Sunny had to give the Millipede Queens some credit. He had rarely met Nightmare Creatures capable of such a high level of control over themselves — Nightmare Creatures rarely retreated, let alone implemented complex strategies, even if there was no chance of surviving their demented attacks.

But even that could not help the Black Millipede tribe. The ambush had failed to stop the advance of the Shadow Legion, and constant skirmishes had failed to stop it, too.

In the end, their resistance was entirely broken. The last major battle the Millipede Queens gave was when the Shadow Legion reached the first of their seven nests — after being decimated there, the millipede swarm broke and fled, never to assemble again.

Sunny burned the nest and sent his shades, as well as the Rat King, on an all-out hunt. Over the next few days, countless millipedes were pursued and slaughtered in the depths of the charred tangle — Sunny himself, meanwhile, continued to pursue the Millipede Queens with the core force of elite shades.

With the help of Slayer, he never lost their trail. Five more nests were destroyed before he reached the final one.

Sunny had expected the Millipede Queens to defend it to their last breath, and was prepared to lay a deadly siege…

However, in the end, he conquered the final nest and laid claim to his second Citadel without any battle at all.

He never got to kill the remaining Great Tyrants, either.

In the depths of the final nest, he found half-devoured carcasses of five of the six Millipede Queens. It seemed that, when facing extermination, they had sacrificed themselves to feed their very essence to the seventh one.

That final Queen then fled north with a small brood of young millipedes, abandoning her nest and escaping from Sunny into the depths of the Burned Forest.

He did not know what would happen to her and her vile ilk — far more terrifying beings inhabited the core of the Burned Forest, after all, and creatures like that rarely welcomed weaker abominations invading their territories.

Perhaps the last Millipede Queen would be devoured by a powerful Nightmare Creature, becoming the end of the Black Millipede Tribe. Perhaps she would be able to flee far north and establish herself on a new territory, then spread like a plague once more.

In any case, with the escape of the last Millipede Queen, the war against the Black Millipede tribe was over.

Having expanded the Shadow Legion greatly, Sunny had finally conquered the southern outskirts of the former Heart Realm.

He had won.

***

'Victory sure tastes sweet.'

Riding Nightmare across the Eastern Quadrant, Sunny smiled.

He had tasted defeat too many times in the Burned Forest, so this eventual triumph washed away the bitter taste from his mind.

Of course, there was plenty of land left to conquer in the Burned Forest... its outskirts in other cardinal directions, its heartland, the titanic stump of the world-tree...

But that would come in time, no doubt.

For now, he had other things to worry about.

Cresting a low hill, Sunny stopped Nightmare and looked ahead, a complicated expression appearing on his face.

'I've made it.

In front of him was the ocean.

Chapter-2581: Night Garden

The feeling of bliss Sunny had felt while traversing the safety of the Eastern Quadrant evaporated as soon as he saw the ocean.

The sun was setting, painting the vast expanse of undulating water into a million fiery shades. It was as if both the heavens and the ocean were aflame, enveloped by a beautiful crimson blaze — a sight no less breathtaking than the nightmarish vistas of the Dream Realm.

This dying world had its own beauty to offer, as well, made only more poignant by its looming end.

Beauty and danger often went hand in hand, though, and the oceans of Earth had long become home to unfathomable horrors.

Sunny had braved the dark expanse of the Indian Ocean a few times, including all by himself soon after becoming a Saint. He had survived back then, but the memories of the frenzied voyage never failed to make him shiver.

Now, too, a cold chill ran down his spine.

'...I wonder how bad the ocean really is.'

By all accounts, it could not be as terrifying as the Death Zones of the Dream Realm. Most of the Nightmare Creatures populating the infested waters could not be of a Rank higher than Corrupted, after all — even if a few Great Ones did reside in the depths of the ocean, they would not pose a serious threat to Sunny.

If not for the gnawing suppression of the War Realm, he could have cleansed the entire ocean of Nightmare Creatures, making sailing across it as safe as traversing the Eastern Quadrant had been.

Of course, there was little point in doing so — all of Earth was going

to become part of the Dream Realm soon.

Before that happened, however, the Dream Realm seemed to have already invaded Earth in a way it was not supposed to.

Out there, in the distance, something that had never been meant to grace the verdant reaches of Earth was resting on the waves, bathed in the crimson light of the setting sun.

"So this is the Night Garden."

Sunny looked at the wandering Great Citadel that had ostensibly become the headquarters of the government, his face full of wonder.

The colossal ship was truly titanic, spanning more than a kilometer from port to starboard and a dozen times that from bow to stern. Its ancient hull was made of wood but had no seams, resembling a hollowed out branch of an unfathomably large tree — its hull rose from the waves like a dark wall, the immense silhouette of the gargantuan vessel appearing too enormous to exist on Earth.

Sunny had thought that the alloy behemoths which had carried the First Evacuation Army to Antarctica were unreasonably giant, but the Night Garden made them look like toy ships.

Despite that, it did not seem heavy and hulking like those massive battleships did. Instead, the Night Garden seemed graceful in its elegant immensity, the flowing lines of its hull emanating a feeling of dark harmony. It rested easily on the water, resembling an ancient city rising from the waves.

The ship was indeed like a city in and of itself, with dozens of decks, beautiful palaces, and tall pagodas built on its surface, as well as hidden from view on its vast holds. It had wild groves, rushing streams, and deep lakes. Masts that were as tall as mountains rose into the blazing sky like trees, their beams spreading far and wide like branches…

With the arrival of settlers in the wake of the Godgrave War, the palaces of Night Garden became homes to countless people. Its groves became cultivated fruit gardens, and its meadows became fertile

fields. People strolled along bustling promenades, children played on lake shores, and countless colorful lanterns illuminated the great ship, making it glow like a jewel against the backdrop of encroaching night.

The Night Garden was not as populous as Bastion or Ravenheart, but it was still home to millions of people now — most of them were government workers and warriors or their dependents, with some refugees mixed in.

The wandering citadel of the Demon of Repose was vast, but it was not vast compared to cities like NQSC. However, unlike ordinary cities, the Night Garden was layered, with many decks stacked on top of each other — that was how all these people managed to settle on it, making the Great Citadel their home.

Safely hidden in the shadows, Sunny enjoyed the dreamlike view of the titanic ship for a long while.

It was a bit funny, but in all these years, this was the first time he saw the Night Garden.

He had seen its likeness as a picture or on the screen, of course, but never with his own two eyes. The great vessel looked much more striking in real life, emanating a mystical feeling… it was almost as if the Night Garden possessed its own presence.

It was not what Sunny saw that affected him the most, though — it was what he sensed.

'How strange.'

His shadow sense washed over the titanic ship, trying to penetrate its hull. Just like in the Jade Palace and the Great Castle, it failed — his senses were dampened by the ancient wood, making it impossible to perceive what was happening in the great vessel's cavernous holds.

The daemons had liked their privacy, it seemed.

Sunny did sense the shadow cast by the Night Garden on the water, though.

And that shadow was not like the shadows that inanimate objects cast. Instead, it was more akin to the shadow of a living thing, and so, Sunny had no choice but to assume that the Night Garden… was alive.

Perhaps not in the way that Sunny was alive — well, he was a bad example, really — but alive nonetheless.

In any case, the task of finding Jet among the millions of people had become difficult because of the titanic ship interfering with his shadow sense.

It was only when the sun drowned in the ocean and the night embraced the world that Sunny finally felt a familiar shadow.

He smiled faintly.

'Time to knock on Reaper's door…'

Chapter-2582: Profound Perils of Spending Time with Strange Shadows

Stepping through the shadows, Sunny found himself at the summit of the tallest pagoda of the Great Citadel. The towering palace was actually built inside and around the main mast of the Night Garden, surrounding its lower part with a cascade of tiled roofs and graceful terraces.

The terraces themselves were gardens, with emerald grass covering their expanse and ancient trees swaying in the cool breeze. The summit was like a grove, the leaves whispering as they moved above the surface of a quiet pond — this high, there was nothing but the masts of the titanic vessels and the stars above it, so the water reflected the starlit sky, seeming like a fragment of it.

Jet was sitting on the soft grass, leaning against the trunk of a tall tree as she gazed at the distant constellations. She seemed to have adjusted to her life aboard the Night Garden well — she appeared more at ease than usual, at least, enjoying the rare moment of silence in comfortable solitude.

Her usual government uniform was gone, replaced by an armor Memory that resembled a wetsuit crafted from the inky-black skin of an unknown sea monster. The thing was similar to the Memories that members of the House of Night usually wore into battle, and was far more practical than conventional armor when fighting in the depths…

Of course, it also outlined her tantalising figure beautifully, but having gone through the Southern Campaign side by side with Jet, Sunny had become somewhat immune to that sight.

He did not make any noise, and yet, she turned her head in his direction, her icy blue eyes almost glowing in the darkness of the warm night.

"Ah, Lord Sunless. Welcome to the Night Garden… I was told to expect you."

There were lanterns hanging from the branches here and there. Walking into their light, Sunny looked around curiously, noting the golden fruits growing between the leaves of the surrounding trees, and sat down as well.

"Greetings, Saint Jet... just call me Sunny, please. Otherwise, I'll feel awkward."

He leaned against a tree, looking at the stars reflecting on the surface of the calm pond.

Jet chuckled.

"Well, alright then."

She remained silent for a few moments and then sighed.

"I wanted to ask if you are younger than me, but then realized that the question is meaningless. After all, we are poised to live for hundreds of years… thousands, maybe, or even indefinitely. So, what difference do a few years make?"

A lazy smile appeared on her lips.

"It's a bit unfair, though. Even if we do survive until we are hundreds of years old… I will still be the oldest one, forever. How disheartening."

Sunny scoffed.

"I don't know. I have felt like I am too old for all this crap since I was sixteen. So, I enjoy being older than other people — after all, I worked really hard to reach that age. My age is something that I earned, not something that just happened to me."

And Jet had worked harder than most to earn hers — much, much harder, because of her Flaw.

He smiled and added in a neutral tone:

"Oh, but I am still younger... by about ten years."

She gave him a resentful glare.

"Ouch."

With that, Jet looked at him curiously. She lingered for a long while, and then asked:

"So, is it my turn to go on a perilous journey and learn a profound lesson about myself, the world, and life from you?"

Sunny coughed.

"W—what?"

She grinned.

"That is what happened with Kai and Effie, is it not? They told me about their misadventures. You received rave reviews, though, so don't worry."

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"That… in a way, I guess? I am hoping to avoid the perilous part this time, however. Not everything has to be deadly and utterly dreadful, right?"

It did not, but if Sunny was honest with himself, he had to admit that his chances of avoiding deadly and dreadful perils were quite low this time around, as well.

He hesitated for a couple of seconds, and then shrugged.

"As for some kind of profound lesson, I am not sure that there is anything I can teach you. You… strike me as a person who knows exactly who you are, what you want, and how to go about achieving

it. So, if anything, I should be the one learning from you."

It had always been that way. Sunny had begun his journey as Jet's junior, became her equal after a while, and even managed to overtake her eventually — but throughout all these years, he had never once stopped thinking about her as a respected senior.

Her experience and pragmatic wisdom had always guided him on his thorny path — it was one of the main reason he was still alive, really.

So what would Sunny even teach Jet?

The true essence of Supremacy?

He studied her for a while, then said in a distant tone:

"The essence of Supremacy is a defiant resolve to see the world bend to your will. However, there is no need to teach you about that. After all, your very existence is an act of defiance against the world. Every day you continue to live is a testament to your will."

Jet smiled.

"Continue to live, huh?"

Then, she leaned back and let out a quiet laugh.

"You and I are quite a pair, aren't we?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"I guess we are?"

She looked at him with a grin.

"I mean, I am somewhat of a zombie, and you are technically a ghost. Isn't that amusing?"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments with an unreadable expression.

Eventually, he let out a cough.

"I was thinking more in the line of me being the Sovereign of Death while you are the Soul Reaper, but yes, your description is certainly amusing."

Jet nodded in satisfaction.

"So, Sunny, what exactly are we going to do?"

He lingered for a while, and then answered in a subdued tone:

"That is something I am going to find out soon."

Before that, however, the Night Garden had to return to the Dream Realm.

Chapter-2583: Living Ship

At dawn, Sunny was sitting on the Shadow Chair and watching the sun rise with a crystal glass of wine in his hand. It was quite difficult to get intoxicated as a Supreme — unless he wanted to — so the wine was nothing more than a symbolic gesture that Jet had insisted on.

They had to celebrate the Skinwalker's demise, after all.

Soul Reaper herself was reclining in a lounge chair of her own, with the striking vista of the Night Garden stretching below them. She looked at the lilac radiance of dawn and sighed.

"Life sure is strange sometimes…"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"How would we know? We're dead."

Jet laughed.

"Fair..."

She remained silent for a while, then said with a hint of amusement in her laidback tone:

"But really — yesterday, I was at war with a Great Terror. Today, the Terror is gone, and the war is over. Mind you, I am not complaining... who would complain about peace? Anyone would agree, though, that it was all quite sudden."

Sunny shrugged.

"No need to worry… there's plenty of Great Terrors left to go around."

He took a sip of wine, then looked at Jet with curiosity.

"So, what are you going to do next? And I don't mean it philosophically — rather, what exactly is going to happen in the next few days?"

Jet did not consider his question for more than a moment.

"It's all a big mess. Nobody has really decided what to do with the Eastern Quadrant yet, but honestly, that is of little consequence for us. The Night Garden was supposed to escort a naval convoy across the ocean — that has not changed. It will be our last voyage in the waking world for a long while, though, because the ship's reserves of essence are running low. We were meant to return to the Dream Realm after delivering the refugees to the Northern Quadrant, and that has not changed either."

She lingered for a moment and then added neutrally:

"So, we will return to the Stormsea after about a week."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Reserves of essence? And how, exactly, does the Night Garden replenish itself in the Dream Realm?"

Jet smiled, looking at the magnificent landscape of the titanic ship with a hint of affection.

"There are two main ways."

She pointed up.

"Have you not wondered why this ship has such tall masts, but no sails?"

The masts of the Night Garden were terrifyingly tall, extending many kilometers into the sky — the main mast, especially, was tall like a mountain. Each horizontal beam attached to them was long and wide enough to serve as a street, but there was no human dwelling there despite the limited space on the decks of the gargantuan vessel.

There were no sails, either.

Sunny shrugged.

"The question did cross my mind."

He was not ignorant of how the Night Garden functioned, of course. However, hearing it from the woman who had ruled the Great Citadel for more than a year was more valuable than theoretical knowledge or listening to hearsay.

Jet exhaled slowly.

"The masts serve as lightning rods. They attract lightning, and the ship absorbs its power. So, to help it replenish its reserves, all we need to do is brave a storm — one of the mystical storms of the Stormsea, best of all. Those are… nothing short of apocalyptic in their scope and scale, but the Night Garden can barrel through one without much trouble. This ship is truly unyielding."

She yawned.

"The second way is to feed it Nightmare Creatures. The more, the better."

Sunny remained silent for a while, staring at her with an unreadable expression.

"And how, exactly, does it eat those Nightmare Creatures?"

Jet smiled.

"Well, it doesn't actually chew and devour them. The Night Garden might resemble a living thing, but it does not have a maw. Instead, the Nightmare Creatures get absorbed into the hull, and then… digested by it, I guess."

Her smile seemed a little ironic.

"The ship can absorb some essence that way, but the primary purpose of that particular method seems to be resource collection to allow the hull to repair itself. That is what the remaining members of the House of Night think, at least."

Jet looked at Sunny and said in an even tone:

"Oh… and it is not only Nightmare Creatures that the hull of the Night Garden will absorb. In truth, it does not differentiate between living beings — anything will do. So, don't go around crawling on the outer hull… not that I thought that you would."

She smiled faintly and looked away.

"In a way, it makes sense. The masts of the Night Garden are like branches and leaves, absorbing celestial energy, while its hull is like roots, absorbing minerals and the like from the earth… or the ocean, to be precise. In any case, the ship needs to replenish itself from time to time, and the Stormsea is the perfect place for that to happen."

Sunny remained silent for a while, and then asked in a tone that betrayed a hint of grim apprehension:

"And what happens if the Night Garden is not… fed on time?"

Jet chuckled.

"In short? Nothing, really."

She looked at the last vestiges of darkness hiding on the western horizon.

"The Night Garden was starved and largely dormant when the Nightwalker first discovered and claimed it. However, it was not dead, and neither was it starving. Although lightning and Nightmare Creatures are its main sources of sustenance, they aren't the only ones. The ship can also absorb starlight, ambient spirit essence, seaweed and coral, the energy of the wind, the force of the waves — anything and everything, really. Its capacity to repair and refuel itself is almost inexhaustible."

Jet grinned.

"Which is quite fitting, considering that it was created by the Demon of Repose. She was the Demon of rest and rejuvenation, after all, so her ship was able to endlessly repair and restore itself, it seems."

Looking at Sunny, Jet then raised an eyebrow.

"That daemon… she does not sound as dreadful as the rest of her siblings, does she? I mean, what's so scary about rest and restoration?"

Sunny gave her a long, somber look.

"That just sounds like the Demon of Repose will end up being the most harrowing of them all. Doesn't it?"

Jet met his gaze, then pursed her lips and looked away.

"I do hate to admit it, but you make a good point…"

Chapter-2584: Demon's Ark

Once the sun rose, Sunny hid himself in Jet's shadow as she went about preparing the Night Garden for departure from the Eastern Quadrant. The daemonic ship's stay here had ended up on an unexpected note, but people seemed to be elated to know that the war against the Skinwalker was over — they were beyond themselves, really.

Humanity had suffered a long streak of debilitating losses here in the waking world over the past few decades, each one bringing it one step closer to complete annihilation — the devastation of America, the fall of Antarctica… people expected Australia to follow them in becoming lost, as well, but now it was unexpectedly saved.

That astonishing reversal did not merely impact the Eastern Quadrant, but also gave people a hope that the downward spiral of Earth as a whole could come to an end.

Of course, they knew by now that their homeworld was not going to exist for much longer — but that future was too distant and too daunting to truly fathom. So, today, they were celebrating.

Nobody really knew how the Skinwalker had fallen, because the authorities of the Human Domain had not issued a statement yet. Rumors and theories were naturally abound, one more fantastical than the next… Sunny was curious to see how the public's reaction would change once everyone learned the truth of Mordret's ascension to the throne of Supremacy.

Would they be happy, still? Or wary? Would they fear another civil war?

Mordret's reputation was not the greatest, after all, due to what he had done to the House of Night. Many of the remaining members of the former Great Clan were here, on the Night Garden, and had

become the pillars of the local community. They were not going to be happy to learn that the executioner of their clan was a Supreme now, and people who held them in great esteem would not be happy either.

In any case, the truth was not going to come until a few days later. By then, the Night Garden would be in the middle of the ocean, sailing across its perilous expanse to the distant shores of the Northern Quadrant.

Sunny was quite curious about the seafaring Great Citadel. He was familiar with the Chain Breaker quite well, and wanted to know if the Night Garden operated in a similar fashion — as it turned out, although there were some outward similarities, there was little in common between the two enchanted ships.

The Chain Breaker was a creation of exquisite, but ultimately mundane runic sorcery. It used the soul essence of the sacred tree that grew around its mast to empower the runic array, which kept the ship in the air and propelled it across the sky. The helmsman connected to the array by entering the runic circle and infusing it with their own essence, then steered the vessel with two steering oars.

There were some mystical qualities to the Chain Breaker and the materials used to craft it, but Sunny could at least understand the principles of everything that went into making the graceful vessel fly.

He could not fathom how the Night Garden moved at all, though.

There was a helmsman's runic circle as well — which was far more elaborate than the one on the Chain Breaker — but it was not connected to a runic array. In fact, there was no array to speak of anywhere on the ship. There were no sails either, and obviously, the ancient ship was too heavy and gargantuan to be pushed forward by rowing.

There was no discernible reason for it to move at all. And yet, it did move — as long as the master of the Night Garden willed it, the titanic ship would sail forward as if carried by invisible winds. It could reach truly frightening speeds, as well… and Sunny suspected

that they had not discovered its full potential yet, either.

After all, the Night Garden had not been created to be steered by a mere Saint. It gave a Supreme the power to open Gates between two spaces in the same realm, for example, so what would it have been capable of when the Demon of Repose herself controlled it? Where would it have been able to travel?

How far would it have been able to go?

The Night Garden contained its own isolated ecosystem. It could travel freely, absorb all kinds of energies to maintain itself, and provide its passengers with everything they needed to live.

As Sunny thought about it, an eerie thought crossed his mind…

The thought that perhaps one day, long after all of existence was consumed by Corruption, the titanic ship of the Demon of Repose would still continue to sail, drifting across the boundless dark expanse of the Void.

'I am not sure if that image is hopeful or ominous.'

More importantly… since the Night Garden was a living thing, could that thing get corrupted itself?

What would happen to the passengers if it did?

'How scary.'

The bridge of the titanic ship was in the same great pagoda where Jet's private quarters and spacious room garden were located, just a few floors below the spot where they had enjoyed wine while watching the sun rise.

It was a vast room with elegant arched windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, and due to the pagoda's great height, one had a perfect view of most of the ship and its surroundings from here. An elaborate runic circle was etched into the floor, igniting with ethereal light for a few moments when Jet stepped inside.

The main mast of the ship was behind them, blocking the view in

that direction, but as she had explained to Sunny on the way down, the person connected to the elaborate runic circle shared a kind of awareness with the ship, so she could sense what was happening behind the Night Garden as well while steering it.

Sunny did not know what exactly he had expected from the bridge of the Great Citadel, but he imagined it as something out of a space exploration drama — a great hall with an imposing chair meant for the captain and various stations for the crew placed around it.

However, there was no chair. There were no stations, either… which made sense, in hindsight.

After all, the Demon of Repose would not have needed the assistance of subordinates to steer her own ship.

There were some people on the bridge at the moment, though, because Jet was not quite a daemon. Giving them a short greeting, she stood in the center of the runic circle and smiled.

"Shall we depart, ladies and gentlemen?"

Sunny sensed the great ship moving beneath him.

Chapter-2585: Moving Feast

It seemed strangely wrong, for something as immense as the Night Garden to move. And yet, it did — slowly at first, and then faster and faster, the titanic ship began to glide across the undulating waves. The oceanic waves themselves seemed impossibly small as they broke against its living hull, merging into a flat aquamarine plane while stretching toward the distant horizon.

It was as if an entire island suddenly decided to move on, complete with a city full of millions of people. The groves were moving, the meadows were moving, and the lakes were moving as well… Sunny knew that there was nothing odd about it, logically, and yet his mind was failing to reconcile the inconceivable scale of it all with what was happening.

'This world… it truly knows how to make one feel small, does it not?'

And that was coming from someone who could turn into a hundred-meter-tall colossus whenever he wished.

A loud cheer reached the runic hall from the upper decks of the Night Garden, where people had poured onto the promenades along the edges of the titanic ship to watch it depart from the Eastern Quadrant. The atmosphere, despite the perilous journey that awaited them, felt bright and festive.

For some of them, this was just another journey. For some — those who had boarded the Great Citadel in the Eastern Quadrant as refugees — it was the first voyage. Their continent was liberated from the clutches of the Skinwalker now, but their cities and homes were already gone, so the newcomers were eager to experience the seas and build a new home for themselves on the Night Garden.

Sunny had only spent one morning on the titanic ship, but he could already tell that life here was one of starkly opposing extremes.

The Great Citadel itself was idyllic and beautiful beyond belief, while the storms assaulting its impregnable hull and the Nightmare Creatures besetting it were furious and chillingly horrifying. Somehow, though, the dread of the dark and tumultuous seas only made the vibrant beauty of the Night Garden more comforting.

Plus, it belonged to Soul Reaper Jet. She had come far from the days when people who knew of her — mostly Awakened — treated her with distaste and aversion due to the ruthless cruelty of her murderous ways. Now, there was no person in the world who did not know the Soul Reaper, and her reputation, while not as loud as that of the other great champions of humanity, was stellar.

People treated her with the respect and esteem reserved only for those who had earned it. Jet had always been a professional, and her profession was serving humanity — she had a spotless track record of being good at her job, as well, so being under Soul Reaper's wing meant being safe. That was why refugees were happy to settle on the Night Garden and become a part of the community here.

'What is this feeling?'

Hiding in Jet's shadow and watching her steer the titanic Citadel while giving her subordinates commands, Sunny felt his heart swell a little. He felt like a proud parent… proud child? Proud student or a comrade, perhaps.

In any case, Sunny had to get down to business. He was reasonably sure that the sixth fragment of Weaver's lineage was hidden somewhere on the Night Garden, or at least somewhere where the Night Garden could help him reach. At the moment, Sunny was being suppressed by the War Realm, so he could not search too actively… but that did not mean that he could not do anything.

As the Night Garden slowly moved along the coast of Australia, Sunny extended his shadow sense in all directions — or at least tried to. The hull of the ancient vessel was interfering with his perception, so he could not cast a wide net. He could still explore the ancient vessel bit by bit, though, finding paths where the living wood did not block his senses.

The Night Garden had countless decks and cavernous holds, with bustling activity of a thriving city. It was also full of strange and wondrous things, so finding one well-hidden anomaly here was going to be much harder than finding a needle in a haystack.

Sunny could sense the entirety of a haystack in a split second, find the needle, and count each individual strand of hay on top of that… actually, he already had a needle — Weaver's Needle — so he would not need to do something so senseless, to begin with. However, finding the fragment of Weaver's lineage was going to take a lot of effort and meticulous work.

Sadly, an annoying distraction kept invading his senses when he tried to focus.

At first, there was the sound of wings.

Then, there was the sound of small talons click-clacking on the wooden floor.

Then, someone aimed a persistent stare at him.

'It's alright… I am hidden in Jet's shadow. No one can see me.'

But then, someone jumped onto the shadow, walked this way and that across its surface, and even pecked at it with a sharp beak a few times.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Sunny focused on his immediate surroundings.

A black bird was standing on top of him, looking down with unreadable round eyes. Its inky feathers glistened in the morning light.

Crow Crow pecked Jet's shadow one more time, then spread its wings and cawed loudly:

"Sah-nee! Sah-nee!"

Sunny gritted his teeth — metaphorically speaking — and produced a quiet whisper:

"Get off me, stupid bird. Go away!"

Crow Crow stared at him some more, then waved its wings a couple of times.

"Bird! Bird!"

Sunny sighed.

"Yes, you are a bird. I don't even know how you noticed me, but please, stop blowing my cover and go annoy Jet, instead."

Crow Crow tilted its head, then hopped up and down the shadow a few times and flew up to perch on Jet's shoulder.

Giving Sunny a smug look from his perch, it then cawed again:

"Bird! Jet!"

Sunny suppressed a groan.

Something was telling him that concentrating on the search was not going to be easy.

Chapter-2586: Crow's Nest

"Let me tell you, Crow Crow… those daemons all had a thing for unnecessarily huge structures. Why are all their Citadels so stupidly huge? No, really, what were they compensating for?"

Sitting in the crow's nest of the main mast of the Night Garden, many kilometers above the surface of the ocean, Sunny looked at the horizon with a bitter expression. Actually, no one was crazy enough to get this high, especially because the masts of the titanic ship were designed to attract lightning, so he could enjoy some privacy here.

Which he did after spending a long, long time fruitlessly searching the endless expanse of the gargantuan ship for traces of Weaver.

Crow Crow tilted its head and gave him a contemplative look, then opened its beak.

"Crow! Crow!"

Sunny sighed.

"Exactly! You make a good point. And what about their own size? Don't they have the decency to stick to one size, at least? Slayer did not seem that much shorter than Weaver in the vision… so why the hell was Weaver's reflection a hundred meters tall? What is that about, huh?"

The tiny bird stared at him with its glistening black eyes.

"Short! Short!"

Sunny scowled.

"Who are you calling short, you soot-covered rook? Let me tell you, I can be as tall as I want! I am just choosing to be this size! A hundred

meters is nothing..."

Crow Crow gave him a pitying look and cawed, as if proving the point:

"Soot! Soot!"

Sunny scoffed and looked away.

The coast of Australia, which used to be visible beyond the starboard of the Night Garden, was now almost behind them. And on the water below, a naval convoy of dozens of immense battleships was slowly moving into formation behind the Great Citadel's wide bow.

Well, the battleships had seemed immense when Sunny first saw them, all the way at the start of the Chain of Nightmares. Now, hiding in the shadow cast by the hull of the Night Garden, the alloy behemoths looked like a flock of clumsy ducklings following the mama duck.

Sunny saw a few familiar figures, as well.

On one side of the convoy, a giant killer whale briefly breached the surface of the water, then dove into the depths again. On the other side, a colossal sea serpent cut the waves with the spikes of its long dorsal fin while accelerating to catch up with the titanic ship.

Soon enough, the serpent disappeared, and a man climbed the series of rope ladders to the deck of the Night Garden, careful not to touch the surface of the hull.

By the time Naeve reached the deck, Jet was already waiting for him, having descended from the runic hall as a torrent of flowing mist.

Someone else was waiting for the Saint of Night there, as well — a teenage girl with hair that glistened with an indigo sheen in the warm sunlight.

"Dad!"

Sensing the movement of their shadows, Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Who's the girl?"

His eyes widened.

"Wait, is that Naeve's daughter? What… when did she become a teenager? I could have sworn that she was five just a few years ago!"

He looked at Crow Crow and coughed in embarrassment.

"Well, I suppose that is how aging works… wait, how old is Naeve?"

Raising a hand, he began counting on his fingers. When his fingers proved insufficient, he summoned a few shadow hands and continued counting on them.

"Goodness gracious, what a fossil."

It was good that Jet could not hear him, because according to his calculations, they were the same age.

Sunny gave Crow Crow a suspicious look.

"You are not going to rat me out, are you?"

Crow Crow flapped its wings.

"Rat! Rat!"

...Whatever that was supposed to mean.

Naeve, who had been absent from the Night Garden to guard the refugee ships, gave his daughter a hug and patted her on the head. Then, he turned to Jet.

"Everyone is accounted for, so we are ready to depart as soon as the details of the defensive formation are decided. The diviners have not sensed any powerful abominations moving along our chosen route, either. I have the report with the exact numbers with me, so should we discuss it now? Oh, there is also a small issue with supplies…"

His daughter crossed her arms and pouted.

"Daaaad."

Naeve fell silent for a moment.

"Or we can discuss it in an… hour?"

Sunny sighed.

"Alas, I don't have a cute daughter to help me slack off. Yet. Anyway, back to work…"

Crow Crow let out a caw of affirmation.

Closing his eyes, Sunny concentrated on exploring the Night Garden with his shadow sense. The little bird, meanwhile, grew bored with his company and went on a patrol across the highest horizontal beam of the main mast, waddling along its edge with an exceedingly serious look.

Soon enough, the Night Garden began to move again, heading north. The battleships fell into formation behind it, and before too long, the coast of Australia disappeared from view.

There was nothing but open water around them.

The first time Sunny had crossed the ocean, it had been a nerve-wracking affair. The battleship felt like an alloy coffin, and he could not help but feel wary, knowing the only thing that separated him from the watery depths was a few layers of mundane metal.

The naval convoy had been attacked by Nightmare Creatures many times, as well, once even coming closer to losing several ships.

Now, Sunny felt much safer — so safe, in fact, that he did not see a reason to worry at all. Not only was he a Sovereign, but he was also sailing on the Night Garden. The titanic ship was not exactly invincible, but there was nothing in the Indian Ocean that could seriously harm it, let alone sink it.

The Stormsea, on the other hand…

'Let's hope that I find what I am looking for before we return to the Dream Realm.'

Despite Sunny's hopes, however, he did not.

No matter how meticulously he explored the Night Garden, there was no trace of anything left behind by Weaver. His blood did not react at all, and even his intuition remained silent.

It was as if there was no clue anywhere on the ship at all.

With each day that passed without producing a result, Sunny's mood turned more somber. Eventually, he had to admit something that he had been avoiding all along.

'I think… I will have to use that thing to locate Weaver's traces.'

Just thinking about it made him shiver.

Chapter-2587: Forces of Nature

In the end, they reached the Northern Quadrant without much trouble. The voyage took less time and was much less eventful than any of the previous times Sunny had crossed the ocean — most Nightmare Creatures seemed to be wary of the Night Garden and kept their distance, while those who did not were absorbed by the living hull of the titanic ship.

It was quite a chilling sight.

The living wood was like quicksand, refusing to let go of anyone who touched its weathered surface. The abominations who recklessly tried to assault or scale it would get their limbs caught in its impenetrable bulwark, and then slowly pulled into the hull of the Night Garden, never to be seen again. They struggled desperately as the living wood absorbed them — but to no avail.

A few managed to escape by rupturing and tearing off their trapped limbs, but most only became caught more thoroughly because of their frantic struggles. Whatever scratches they managed to leave on the surface of the titanic ship soon vanished without a trace, with all evidence of its existence gone.

So, the horrors of the depths had a good reason to be wary of the Night Garden… or maybe they were wary of Sunny himself, sensing the vast darkness hiding in his shadow.

In any case, there were not as many attacks on the convoy as Sunny had anticipated. Which was not to say there was no danger at all: the battleships following the Night Garden were still vulnerable, and there was also the threat of aerial attacks.

The Great Citadel did not only carry millions of mundane people, though, it also carried countless Awakened warriors — most of them seasoned veterans of the Evacuation Army. Jet and the Saints of the

House of Night were there to keep the situation under control, as well, so every assault on the convoy was repelled with relative ease.

Some of the confrontations with the doomed Nightmare Creatures were more memorable than others, though.

'...I'll be damned.'

Shifting his focus away from the search for the traces of Weaver, Sunny looked ahead with a somber expression.

Out there, in front of the Night Garden, the ocean had turned entirely black.

The stain of oily black water stretched in all directions, far and wide, darkening the distant horizon. Tall waves crashed into the bow of the gargantuan ship violently, reaching toward it like the blackened fingers of an unknown monster… it was the Black Water, a mysterious and malevolent phenomenon that haunted both the Stormsea and the oceans of Earth.

Nobody knew what the currents of the Black Water were, really. Some considered it to be a kind of Nightmare Creature, some thought it to be the remains of an ancient Terror who had been torn into thousands of pieces. Some even believed that it was the blood of an Unholy Titan spilled by the gods at the dawn of time.

Regardless of what it was, however, seeing the water turn black often meant death for those who entrusted their lives to the sea.

…But not this time.

Sunny could vaguely sense something about the Night Garden change when it entered the black waters, as if coming awake. Then, the titanic ship crushed the violent waves and continued sailing forward, cutting the ominous darkness with its bow.

Some time later, the ocean cleared.

'W—what?'

It was not that the convoy had crossed the area tainted by the Black

Water and escaped into clear waters. Rather, the oily darkness infecting the waves simply vanished.

The Night Garden had absorbed the Black Water, just like it would any other Nightmare Creature or source of sustenance.

Forgetting about his search for a few moments, Sunny stared at the pure aquamarine expanse of the ocean with an incredulous expression.

'I never thought I'd see the day when that thing perishes… never once.'

His first encounter with the Black Water had transpired on the way to Antarctica, just before the Chain of Nightmares consumed the Southern Quadrant. Back then, it seemed utterly indestructible… in an entirely different category than the things that could be destroyed, even. Like a force of nature.

But now, the Night Garden had torn apart and absorbed that force of nature, erasing it from the surface of the world.

'Come to think of it… forces of nature are not what they used to be.'

People naturally treated natural disasters as the epitome of inescapable calamity and unfathomable power. But Sunny was a being who could weather any mundane storm, remain standing during the most devastating earthquake, and topple erupting volcanoes now. He was indifferent to floods and couldn't care less about droughts, let alone something as trivial as wildfires.

He himself could cause a calamity much more terrifying than anything nature could muster. So, it should have come as no surprise that the Night Garden absorbed the Black Water — this current of the Black Water, at least.

Somewhere in the Stormsea, there were a thousand more.

'I still have a score to settle with the Dark Sea, too...'

Eventually, the naval convoy led by the wandering Great Citadel reached the coast of the Northern Quadrant. The titanic ship spent

several days near a port fortress, watching over the refugees disembarking from the battleships and loading up on supplies.

Considering how impossibly tall the hull of the Night Garden was, it took quite a lot of effort and several complicated systems of lifts and pulleys to raise the cargo containers all the way up to the deck.

Once all of that was done, the radiant rift of the Dream Gate opened in front of the giant ship, calling it back home, into the nebulous expanse of the Stormsea.

Sunny, who was at his limit, felt glad to escape the unwelcoming pressure of the waking world and return to the Dream Realm… strangely enough, it felt as if the Night Garden was relieved to abandon the barren expanse of the War Realm, as well.

Pushed by invisible winds, the gargantuan ship sailed into the white inferno of the Dream Gate and disappeared from the undulating surface of the ocean, leaving Earth behind.

Chapter-2588: Twilight Sea

Sunny was anticipating witnessing the endless expanse of the Stormsea. He had been to more deadly corners of the Dream Realm than most people — maybe even than any person — but he had only ever been to the misty coast south of Bastion, never venturing into the nebulous waters themselves.

Apart from the idle curiosity of a retired explorer, Sunny also felt a subtle connection to the Stormsea. These were the remains of the world that Daeron the Serpent King had ruled once, after all. The shadows of Daeron and Wind Flower now rested in his soul, while the Twilight Sea they had failed to save had been consumed by the Dream Realm.

Earth would soon share the same fate, so Sunny felt a kind of curiosity that was both poignant and morbid when thinking about the Stormsea.

Regardless of what he had expected, though, his first impression of the nebulous ocean… was a complete disappointment.

That was because Sunny could not see anything at all. Everything around the Night Garden was shrouded in thick mist, plunging the world into a beautiful, but ominous twilight. Even when he climbed to the peak of the tallest mast of the gargantuan ship, he still failed to catch a glimpse of the sky.

The Night Garden ceased all movement after passing through the Dream Gate, which had already vanished and left it alone in the boundless expanse of the misty sea.

"There's nothing much to do. We can't sail until the mist passes — well, technically, nothing is stopping us. It is just too dangerous."

While the Night Garden settled to wait for the weather to improve,

Jet retreated to her quarters to rest. Sunny emerged from her shadow, deciding to take a break too — his search had not produced any results, so continuing in the same manner seemed meaningless.

He had to gather courage before proceeding to the next plan, though.

"What kind of dangers are we talking about?"

Jet gave him an amused look.

"The kind I have no words to describe, and no desire to imagine."

She crossed her legs, looking at the ceiling with a laidback expression.

"Don't worry, though. The Night Garden had been drifting in these waters for thousands of years before being claimed by us humans, and for half a century since. Nothing managed to take it down in all that time."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"Who says that I am worried? Among the long list of my worries, the horrors of the Stormsea are all the way near the bottom."

He found himself a chair and sat down.

Jet chuckled.

"How's anonymity treating you, by the way? It must be hard, for a lofty Supreme to keep hiding in the shadows. Unable to let his existence be known to anyone, instead of basking in the glory."

She had contacted Nephis through Cassie to coordinate the opening of the Dream Gate. But really, Sunny could have sent the Night Garden to the Dream Realm himself… only he couldn't, because his existence was supposed to be a secret.

There was the King of Nothing now, too. The whole world was abuzz with the news of a new Sovereign — the second Sovereign, supposedly — appearing out of nowhere and taking out the Skinwalker. That only made Sunny's situation seem more unfair.

He smiled.

"It's treating me fine, actually — I'm used to it. After all, I've been hiding the fact of my existence from long before becoming Supreme. As for the fame and glory I supposedly deserve, they were never something I chased. In fact, I spent most of my life avoiding them like a plague… to limited success."

Jet remained silent for a while, then said in a contemplative tone:

"Yeah. I never thought I'd be where I am today, either. I am the only Saint who comes from the outskirts, you know? The first… and the last. There's not much left of the outskirts, by now. Most people have already left for the Dream Realm."

She chuckled quietly.

"Who knew that I'd outlive the outskirts? Well… outlive might be too strong a word. Anyway, just thinking about this stuff makes me feel old."

The world was changing swiftly around them. So swiftly, in fact, that sometimes it was difficult to recognize it when taking a glance.

Sunny did not say anything at first, looking at her silently.

Then, he smiled.

"Who says you're the only one? I'm from the outskirts, too. The first Supreme to have come from the outskirts… but, hopefully, not the last."

Jet looked at him in surprise.

"You are from the outskirts?"

She studied him for a while, then let out a sigh.

"Damn. And you're younger than me, too. No, now I simply must conquer the Fourth Nightmare… otherwise, it will be embarrassing…"

Sunny grinned and leaned back.

Jet kept staring at him, a smile slowly finding its way onto her lips.

"I'm glad, though. I... guess we outskirt rats have done well for ourselves, after all. Oh, it also explains why there's no record of you in any government database. I think I drove several intelligence executives into an early retirement while trying to uncover the identity of the Lord of Shadows. I owe them an apology, I guess."

Sunny let out a short laugh.

Then, his expression slowly turned somber.

"Speaking of that… I need to gather some intelligence, as well."

Jet raised an eyebrow.

"I get it that your search is not going well?"

Sunny shook his head slowly.

"No. And since we are pressed for time, I think I am going to have to do something drastic."

He hesitated for a few moments, then gave her a dark look.

"So, I need you to watch over me for a bit. Oh, and if it looks like I am unraveling… knock me out."

Jet's blue eyes widened a little.

"What? How am I supposed to knock out a Supreme? One who has seven bodies, no less?"

Sunny grinned.

"Well, you are Soul Reaper Jet. I am sure you'll figure something out."

With that, he summoned a Memory.

The familiar cool weight of Weaver's Mask settled onto his face a few moments later.

It was time to do something that he had been scared of doing for a long, long while…

To look upon the world and see it the same way Weaver had.

Chapter-2589: Unraveled

A long time ago, the Vile Thieving Bird stole one of Weaver's eyes… and to replace it, Weaver wove a new enchantment into their fearsome mask.

[Where is my eye?]

When the enchantment was activated, the great tapestry of fate revealed itself to the person wearing the mask — either the original one or one of the two Memories of it Weaver had bestowed upon the High Priests of the Nightmare Spell.

The original mask was long gone, having perished with the Demon of Fate. But at least one of the Memory pair remained, and had been found by Sunny in the stone cell under the ruined cathedral of the Dark City… which meant that he could glimpse the vast infinity of fate, as well.

The problem was that mortals were not meant to behold it. The oracles of the nameless realm from which the Nine hailed from lost their sight as a result of catching a glimpse of the great tapestry... but really, they got off easy.

The first time Sunny had activated [Where is my eye?], he almost perished on the spot — the only reason he survived was that the unfathomable enchantment of the Divine Memory exhausted his puny Awakened essence in a heartbeat and fell into slumber once again.

Still, that single heartbeat was seared into Sunny's mind, having scarred him more than any other torment he had ever suffered. In his personal ranking of the most painful experiences of his life, using [Where is my eye?] was still proudly occupying the top position.

It was way worse than being beheaded, having his soul torn apart, and enduring the transformations caused by assimilating Weaver's

lineage…

Sunny had barely survived beholding the vastness of fate as an Awakened, and nothing changed when he was Ascended either. In Antarctica, he had used [Where is my eye?] to kill the Terror of LO49 — Dusk, Sybil of the Fallen Grace. The eerie Corrupted Terror had not quite perished after witnessing the great tapestry of fate, but she was stunned long enough for Sunny to finish the job.

He was a Supreme Titan now, and possessed Mind Weave on top of that. So, Sunny had a reason to believe that he would be able to survive activating [Where is my eye?] this time. However, he was also sure that it was not going to be pleasant…

It was not going to be pleasant at all.

Not only that, but attempting to behold fate was also a path of no return for him. After all, his essence was nearly inexhaustible now — so, even if things went wrong, he would not be saved from whatever price he had to pay by running out of it.

That was why Sunny had been postponing this particular experiment for so long.

He took a deep breath, gathering his courage. The memory of the harrowing agony of trying to fathom fate — having no choice but to try to encompass its boundless infinity with his mortal mind — made him shiver.

"What exactly are you trying to do?"

Jet's laidback smile was gone, replaced by a cold focus.

Sunny lingered for a short while, then said evenly:

"Nothing too serious."

With that, he gritted his teeth and activated [Where is my eye?].

Although many years had passed since the time he witnessed the strings of fate for the first time, he still remembered the sight perfectly — in fact, he could not forget it even if he wanted to, as if

every thread and knot of the great tapestry was branded onto his mind.

Even now, he could imagine it vividly — the endless, beautiful eternity of twisting threads. Those threads transfixed everything in existence, connecting every living being and every object, every thought and every concept, every dream and every nightmare, stretching infinitely into every direction, as well as into the past, the present, and the future.

The terrifying enchantment of Weaver's Mask not only allowed him to see the tapestry of Fate, though, but also forced the understanding of it onto him.

The knowledge of everything, everywhere, all at once…

No wonder he had almost died because of it. The pain back then had been indescribable… blood had streamed out of his nose, eyes, and mouth, and a silent scream had died on his lips. Even when he tried to escape into the shadows, the suffering did not subside — however, that probably prevented his eyes from turning into smoldering embers and his head from exploding.

This time…

It was almost manageable.

Not quite, but almost.

A terrible pain descended upon Sunny, making him feel like his mind was incandescent with searing heat, boiling, and on the verge of erupting like a fuming volcano. He could not help but shudder and let out a tortured groan, wanting to close his eyes, but unable to move… to look away from the wondrous, harrowing sight in front of him, above him, all around him.

'W—what…'

His pupils widened, igniting with a golden glow.

Sunny was stunned.

Because the great tapestry of fate… did not look like the beautiful and awesome image from his memories at all.

Instead, it was torn and ravaged, the infinity of its splendor having been mangled and mutilated, thrown into disarray. The Strings of Fate were all cut and tangled, swaying aimlessly on ghostly winds.

It was complete and utter, ineffable chaos.

Some of the great tapestry — the past — remained as it had been, untouched by the carnage. However, the present was utterly in shambles, and the future…

The future…

Did not exist anymore.

'How… how can this be?'

The shock Sunny experienced was so profound that he even forgot about the terrible pain consuming him.

How could fate, the most immutable thing in existence, have changed?

How could there be no future?

He drew in a shaky breath, searching for the cause of all this chaos — the single knot on the tapestry of fate that had caused all this devastation.

However…

'I don't really have to guess, do I?'

Because the cause was pretty obvious.

It was him.

It was Sunny, his desire to be free of the chains that bound him, and the act of defiance against fate that he and Cassie had perpetrated.

Chapter-2590: Havoc

Sunny had been Fated, and Cassie had been able to know the future.

Sunny had wanted to be free, and Cassie had wanted to change fate.

So, she gave him a choice, and by making that choice, Sunny became a weapon against fate…

He became Fateless.

However, even knowing all that, Sunny had never expected that their act of defiance would be so effective.

'Gods. We were mere Masters back then…'

How could two Masters have damaged the great tapestry of fate so thoroughly? After all, neither the gods nor the daemons had managed to escape their fate.

'How?'

Sunny reeled, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

But then, slowly, a hint of understanding formed in his rattled mind.

Maybe, it was precisely because Sunny had been a mere Ascended that he managed to achieve something that the gods and the daemons… even Weaver… had failed to achieve.

He exhaled slowly, regarding the stunning sight of broken Strings of Fate.

Countless unlikely things had to have happened for him to be cut from their great tapestry. Some of it had been arranged by Weaver, some had resulted from Cassie's meticulous manipulation, and some had been the result of his own efforts. The Vile Thieving Bird — an

inconceivable being whom both the gods and the Creatures of the Void had hated, but were unable to eradicate — played its part, as well.

There were several steps one needed to take to vandalize the great tapestry of fate.

First, someone had to be torn from its fabric, becoming fateless. That alone was already almost impossible to achieve… but not entirely impossible. The Vile Thieving Bird could steal someone's fate, after all, and if it could, then Weaver — the Demon of Fate — could have probably managed something similar, as well.

Second, the being vanquished from fate had to be someone significant enough for their absence to affect the entire vast tapestry. They had to be someone whose actions echoed across all of existence, reaching its every distant corner, and whose fate was therefore innately intertwined with the fates of everyone and everything.

Lastly, that being… had to be weak enough for their fate to be taken away from them.

And there lay the paradox.

A weak being would not be significant enough for the absence to disrupt all of fate, and the fate of a powerful being could not be stolen.

So, destroying fate was impossible.

Or rather… it had been impossible, before.

Sunny was not powerful enough to affect all of existence. While he had done quite well for himself by modern standards, climbing to the throne of Supremacy, the great figures of ancient times easily dwarfed him. Compared to the gods and the daemons, he was not even an ant… he was like a speck of dust.

For now, at least.

Sunny had not been significant enough — however, he had been Fated. The Strings of Fate — a staggering amount of them — had

been wrapped around him tightly. His life had been a nexus on the tapestry of fate, and once that nexus was cut, many others would have come undone.

However, that by itself would not have been enough, either. After all, he knew that there had been other Fated individuals before him, like the Nine — his personal influence, while widespread, was not that great.

But influence… was a relative thing.

If Sunny had lived during the end of the Golden Age and the horrors of the Doom War, with all the giants moving in the darkness around him, his influence on the world would have been limited. What change could Sunny have affected when the gods and the daemons were there, deciding the fate of existence according to their whims?

A thousand of his actions, or lack thereof, would not have accounted for one thousandth of a single feat performed by any of the great deities.

But all of them were gone now.

The gods were dead, and the daemons had fallen.

In the vacuum left by their passing, at the end of times, with only a single human realm left standing in the sea of Corruption…

Sunny, as one of the few Supremes of the Age of Nightmare Spell — and poised to become a Spirit — had a profound influence. There was simply no one greater than him, and therefore, his actions echoed across all of existence. The impact of his choices was universal.

Sunny was both significant enough to affect everything now that there was no one more powerful, and weak enough for his fate to be stolen.

So what would happen if someone like him was suddenly torn from the fabric of fate?

The great tapestry of fate…

Would unravel.

Since the choices Sunny made influenced everything, it would unravel utterly and completely — losing the support of a nexus… an anchor, perhaps… the Strings of Fate would come undone, causing every other String that touched them to lose purchase, too. The chain reaction would result in a cascade failure, causing unimaginable damage and havoc.

He was a single variable that broke the system, introducing chaos to a predetermined flow of events.

'I…'

Faced with the inconceivable chaos of unraveling fate, Sunny completely forgot the reason he had activated [Where is my eye?], to begin with.

'There's more to it as well, isn't there?'

The future was uncertain and insubstantial, brimming with an infinite number of possibilities — both hopeful and dreadful, more sorrowful and vile than anything he could ever imagine.

No wonder the oracles and diviners had lost their ability to predict it.

The damage had already been done, and fate had already come undone.

Now, even if Sunny regained his own, the consequences of his absence would remain.

Once torn, the great tapestry could not be mended.

'H—how's that… for significance?'

Sunny and Cassie had managed to do something that no one had accomplished before...

They had changed fate.

Or at least created the possibility of fate having been changed, in the

end.

That did not seem like something that two mortals could have done… without help.

'Weaver… was that a part of their plan, as well?'

Faced with the infinity of the torn Strings of Fate, Sunny could not help but suspect that the Demon of Fate had a hand in their unraveling.

Sunny and Cassie had achieved something both terrifying and incredible, but even if their effort was uniquely astonishing — in all of history — that did not mean that theirs was the only contribution.

What they accomplished was only possible because of what those before them had achieved.

Still…

Sunny groaned, slowly coming undone under the pressure of beholding fate himself.

None of it would mean anything unless they actually managed to create a benign future, now that any future had become a possibility.

And for that, he had to concentrate on the task at hand.

'Focus...'

Chapter-2591: Touching Fate

It was hard to concentrate when facing literally… everything, ever, all at once, torn and in a state of utter havoc.

And yet, Sunny tried.

He had already achieved something astonishing by enduring the terrible visage of fate without being reduced to a mindless husk. But now, he needed to do something even more unimaginable — he had to actually fathom fate in its endless complexity.

Of course, that was impossible. Even empowered by Mind Weave, Sunny was not at all capable of doing something like that — no one was, really. Even Weaver, the Demon of Fate, could not grasp all of its Strings... although they seem to have gotten pretty close to it.

Sunny had to do the opposite.

Instead of trying to comprehend all of fate, he had to learn how to limit himself to only perceiving a small fraction of it. That, at least, was something he could potentially manage.

In a sense, what Sunny was trying to achieve was the opposite of what he had been trying to do all these years. Ever since becoming a Sleeper, Sunny had been teaching himself how to expand the scope of his mind — first to perceive the world from two points of view at the same time, then from seven, and finally from thousands of them.

Ironically enough, now that he had finally achieved the latter thanks to Mind Weave, he had to narrow the scope of his mind instead.

So, that was what Sunny endeavored to do.

It wasn't easy, especially because he had to contend against the crushing pressure and the stunning torment of beholding the great

tapestry of fate — in that state, simply forming cohesive thoughts was a challenge, let alone guiding them in a desired direction.

However, Sunny was actually helped by the fact that he had just returned from the waking world. After enduring its suppression for an extended period of time, he felt at ease and liberated in the dreadful expanse of the Dream Realm. The relief he felt equalized the pressure he was subjected to, somewhat, and the task of resisting the latter felt familiar.

'All this effort… just to bury my head in the sand like an ostrich…'

...Whatever the hell an ostrich was.

Slowly, gradually, Sunny felt himself growing blind to the vastness of fate. The daunting visage of the great tapestry was still there, all around him, but it was as if Sunny had developed tunnel vision. The confines of his perception were broad at first, then grew narrow. Eventually, he managed to limit the scope of his vision to only those Strings of Fate that pierced the Night Garden.

But even that was too much. So, he focused and made himself blind to more of them: to the fates of millions of mundane people aboard the titanic ship, of the Awakened warriors, of the Nightmare Creatures whose fates ended when they touched the living bulwark of the giant ship's hull… anything and everything that had become a part of the Night Garden recently.

Only then did Sunny manage to let out a relieved sigh.

There were still countless Strings of Fate around him, most of them tangled and torn, but at least their number was not inconceivable anymore.

More than that, Sunny felt like he gained a measure of control over the [Where is my eye?] enchantment. Before, it had both shown him the Strings of Fate and forced the knowledge of them upon him. But now, he could perceive them without knowing them — could behold a fraction of the great tapestry of fate without drowning in it.

It was as if an invisible wall was standing between him and the

overwhelming knowledge… or rather, a door.

One that he could, most likely, open at will.

He just had to find a way to do it.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, thinking. There were countless Strings of Fate around him, piercing all of existence and stretching into infinity. Some of them were dim, while some seemed to shine like rays of incandescent starlight. He was searching for a particular glow, though…

He was searching for the String of Fate made out of pure golden light, like the one that had led him to the Ebony Tower and Weaver's severed arm all those years ago.

Soon enough, he found it.

It wasn't very difficult, because the radiant golden string was right in front of him. There were others like it, as well — after all, the golden hue must have signified a connection to Divine beings, and the Night Garden was a mythical vessel — but he felt especially drawn to this one.

'Now, I just need to follow that string to the hidden spot where Weaver had left their Lineage…'

But he couldn't.

That was because the golden string did not seem to lead anywhere in particular. Instead of stretching to a certain area on the colossal ship, it simply pieced its hull, as if connected to the Night Garden itself.

Sunny frowned behind Weaver's Mask.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

He hesitated for a while, and then did something he had never considered doing before.

Following an impulse, he reached forward…

And grasped the String of Fate in his hand.

To Sunny's relief, his fingers did not turn to ash, and neither were they severed. Most amazingly of all, they did not simply pass through the thread of golden light… they grasped it tightly, as if touching a physical object.

He could feel the very fabric of fate under his fingertips, which tingled slightly.

It was only then that Sunny finally understood the nature of the changes that consuming Weaver's lineage had caused to his mind, body, and soul.

He used to think that the strange quirks of the Weaves were meant to make him adept at Weaver's unique sorcery: Blood Weave had given him the ability to see the strings of essence, Bone Weave had allowed him to touch them, Flesh Weave had made it so he was not cut by them, Mind Weave had allowed him to fathom the endless intricacies of spellweaves…

However, at that moment, he realized that it was all no more than a side effect — that it was merely a prelude.

The true purpose of these alterations… was this.

It was the ability to interact with the Strings of Fate.

'D—damnation...'

As Sunny's fingertips slid across the surface of the golden thread, he shuddered.

Because, through touch, he saw a glimpse of the fate contained within it.

Suddenly, his mind went elsewhere.

Chapter-2592: Hunger of Life

Sunny saw a vast wasteland resting under a blue sky. At its heart, a young sapling struggled as it fought against the crushing pressure of soil, dreaming of light. Soon, it broke free of its dark, nurturing cradle and bathed in the radiance, absorbing the warmth of the sun and being caressed by the winds.

Eventually, the young sapling grew into a mighty tree, towering above the surrounding desert. Its roots spread far and wide, reaching deep into the earth; its branches stretched toward the clouds, swaying as they wished to touch them.

The tree bore wondrous fruit, and, attracted by their scent, creatures came from far away to taste them — gods and spirits, beasts and titans… and humans, too, dressed in furs and carrying tools made of flint.

To satiate their hunger, and fill the emptiness in their hearts.

Time passed, and the wasteland was no more. Instead, a great forest covered its desolate expanse, full of vibrancy and life. Countless beings populated its verdant depths, living at peace with each other. There was no hunger and no strife, no discord or violence among those who dwelled in the Garden of Bliss — only harmony.

The tree had grown tremendously tall. Its roots dug deep into the earth, reaching the soothing darkness of the Shadow Realm; its branches stretched high into the sky, basking in the light of Heaven. The entire forest was born of it, and was part of it — the roots of all trees there were intertwined, forming a single, great being.

And all was fine.

…Until the cold winds came.

Slowly, gradually, an eerie coldness encroached upon the forest from the west. First came the cold, then came the snow — and once the snow started falling, it never stopped. Soon, great mounds of it obscured everything in sight, the sky became hidden, and a relentless blizzard raged across the world, encasing everything in ice.

The leaves of the verdant trees froze and shattered, their bark blackened and cracked, and golden fruits did not grow on their branches anymore. The dwellers of the forest endured for as long as they could, but eventually, pursued by the relentless cold and hunger, they fled their homes and burrows, hoping to find salvation from the cold in distant lands. Abandoning the blissful garden.

Eventually, the forest became frozen and empty.

The great tree at its heart was still alive, encased in ice, but powerless to break it. All it could do was dream of light, of warmth… of being young and strong once more.

That was when a beautiful daemon appeared, her eyes as blue as the warm summer sky.

The vicious cold was banished by her will. The icy carapace that encased the world melted. The long age of snow and hunger the eerie cold had caused came to an end, and soon, new saplings rose from the nurturing soil, brimming with green leaves, dreams of sunlight… and life.

Having been given the gift of repose by the beautiful daemon, the forest was restored and reborn. The great tree was rejuvenated. Since then, winter came every year — but it was followed by spring every year, as well.

Life continued.

That was the vision Sunny saw… but he saw a different vision at the same time, as well.

At first, it was largely the same.

But then, its essence subtly changed.

The great forest still sprawled under the warm sky. Countless beings still dwelled in its verdant depths, and they still knew no hunger or strife — only peace.

But there was no harmony in that peace.

Instead, there was only stagnation and horror.

The countless trees grew uncontrollably, cannibalizing each other's roots and killing their siblings in a desperate competition for a spot under the sun. The ground was covered in countless layers of dead branches, brown leaves, and fallen fruit, all of that endless mass rotting in the sweltering heat of the eternal forest.

The beasts and the humans who knew neither hunger nor strife propagated endlessly, but their minds grew weaker and more feeble with each generation — with no need to fight for anything, they had no need to strive and develop, and as a result, both their minds and their bodies gradually degraded.

Eventually, their numbers grew so vast that even the boundless resources of the great forest could not sustain them anymore. So, in their endless hunger, they turned to endlessly devouring each other, their blood and bones becoming inexhaustible fertilizer for the growing trees…

Their lives and deaths nourishing the roots of the great tree and satisfying its own boundless, terrifying, insatiable hunger.

Fueled by it, the great tree continued to grow, and grow, and grow… grow endlessly and hunger endlessly, forever.

Until a beautiful daemon appeared, her eyes as blue as the cold winter ice.

A vicious cold was summoned by her will. It encroached upon the primordial forest from the west, followed by a raging blizzard. Once the snow started falling, it did not stop until the whole world was covered in it, suffocating the forest and encasing the great tree in a prison of ice.

With no warmth to find anywhere and no fruit to gather, the forest

dwellers fled its barren expanse and scattered across the realms. The Garden of Hunger stood empty, devoid of life.

Only the great tree remained, covered in ice and suffering from hunger.

The beautiful daemon then climbed its branches... and spoke to it.

After a while, the snow melted, and the ice melted as well. New saplings sprouted from the ground, and verdant life returned to the rejuvenated land. The forest grew anew.

But ever since then, winter would always come, putting an end to summer.

And thus, the world would get a chance to rest from its hunger... from the boundless hunger of life to grow and expand.

Sunny swayed, failing to digest the jumbled mess of images that had assaulted his mind.

He let out a pained groan, raising one hand to grasp his aching head.

Then, he moved his fingers further along the thread of golden light.

When he did, a new vision revealed itself to him…

The vision of the great tree suffering from a dreadful curse.

Chapter-2593: Smallest Branch

Sunny saw the vibrant forest once again, this time long after the Demon of Repose had created the cycle of seasons. The great tree — the avatar of Heart God — was different, as well. Instead of hungering for exponential growth, it stood like a pillar that supported both heaven and earth, immutable and stable in its towering glory.

The branches of the tree were like a world in and of itself, with human cities built on their weathered surface. The people did not wear furs or use flint weapons anymore, having mastered much more sophisticated tools and developed an elaborate culture… which hinted that he was not seeing the dawn of times anymore.

This had to be the Age of Heroes — the era of mortal champions fighting against the Corrupted Creatures for dominance over the world. That struggle was happening somewhere far away, though, in the mortal realms. The Void could not exert its influence in the Heart Realm, and therefore, there could be no Corruption in the sacred forest.

Which was why it was so startling to see the World Tree falling sick.

A virulent rot spread through its trunk and its branches, turning vast blotches of the weathered bark dark. The golden sap had turned into torrents of abhorrent black pus, flowing from the rotting valleys and raining down on the distant ground. The golden fruits were devoured by gargantuan maggots, and human champions banded into armies to resist the horrors born of them.

The eternal leaves withered and fell, carried away by the wind.

No matter how fiercely the humans resisted, the vile rot continued to spread, slowly devouring more and more of the tree over the course of many generations. The great tree itself tried to battle its sickness, as well, but the insidious disease continued to consume it from

within, gradually spreading toward its roots.

The great tree was a pillar of existence, holding up the heavens and supporting the earth... and that pillar was slowly crumbling.

Sunny was terrified by the visage of the dying vessel of a god. It seemed unthinkable that an avatar of Heart God could have come that close to dying... long before being burned and toppled during the Doom War. Gods were great and ineffable, after all — they were supposed to be all but invulnerable, if not for the absolute law of imperfection they themselves had created.

But perhaps the avatars of the gods were less so.

In any case, Sunny felt a dark sense of curiosity while watching the World Tree rot. He was trying to understand what the sickness ravaging it was.

The spreading rot looked like Corruption — what he imagined Corruption would look like, if manifested as a physical force — but it was not. Instead, the vile disease… was a living being. An Unholy Terror — a malevolent remnant of the Age of Chaos, or maybe an insidious curse uttered by a Void Creature whom the gods had slain.

Not all of the Chaos Creatures had been sealed with the Void, after all. Just like one of the gods ended up being trapped behind the seal, some of them had escaped it — the being whose death gave birth to the Hollow Mountains, for example, and whose blood became the source of true darkness.

The gods had battled the remnant Creatures of the Void at the dawn of the Age of Gods, aided by the daemons, and scars left behind by those primordial battles could still be found across the Dream Realm.

The Corrupted came later, but some of them grew just as powerful. Enough so, it seemed, that even an avatar of one of the gods could not resist this particular Unholy Terror… without help.

And help it did receive.

Answering Heart God's call, the Demon of Repose returned to the sacred forest once again.

Ariel, the Demon of Dread, had defeated an Unholy Titan in combat once. But his sister did not battle the curse consuming the World Tree — rather, she helped the great tree plunge into a state of endless rejuvenation, so that it could consume the disease devouring it instead.

The World Tree rotted and grew anew. Its leaves fell, and new ones sprouted from emerging buds. The dead bark crumbled into dust, then was replaced by fresh growth. The diseased branches broke and fell, causing the world to quake when they impacted the earth, but new branches appeared in their place.

Over, and over, and over again… without end.

Rotting, dying, and being reborn again.

Until the disease was no more.

The Unholy Terror had perished, and the World Tree regained its vitality.

…The cities of humans who had made home in its branches, however, were decimated. Most of them were destroyed, and those that remained became overgrown by leaves and bark, with not a soul in sight. The arrival of the Demon of Repose was a boon for the great tree, but it was an indescribable disaster to those who had lived in the shade of its leaves.

A calamity that could not be escaped, predicted, or reasoned with.

There was a reason, after all, why daemons were feared above all other deities of ancient times.

Once the disease consuming the World Tree was no more, the Demon of Repose left. However, it took payment for helping Heart God save their avatar.

That payment was a young branch of the great tree.

And from that branch, she fashioned a magnificent ship.

A living ship that was more than a kilometer across from port to

starboard, and many times its width in length. One that was like a city in and of itself, with dozens of decks, beautiful palaces, tall pagodas built on its surface, and great mysteries hiding in its boundless holds. A ship with wild groves, rushing streams, and deep lakes.

The Demon of Repose named her ship the Night Garden, and made it her home.

...The World Tree was long destroyed, and the Demon of Repose was dead. However, the Night Garden still remained — the last living sapling of a once great forest.

Chapter-2594: Timely Intervention

Enthralled by the stunning visions of the ancient past, Sunny slid his fingers further down the thread of golden light.

Now, he understood why he had seen the birth of the World Tree and the spread of the Heart God's sacred forest first. It was because the Night Garden had been made from the branch of the great tree, and was therefore a part of it — the last part of it, even.

So, its fate was part of the World Tree's fate, or had been once, at least.

Marveling at that fact, Sunny opened himself to the truth of what events the Night Garden had experienced.

It was difficult… delving into the meaning of the String of Fate was not like reading a book. A colossal torrent of information was pouring into Sunny's strained mind, and he could only absorb a few drops of that crushing flood here and there.

He did not immediately see another detailed vision of the past like the first two. Instead, what he saw were glimpses of various scenes, all jumbled and mixed together.

The Night Garden sailing on a misty sea… the Night Garden battling a storm so ferocious that entire realms could have been washed away by it… the Night Garden moving across the great black void between the stars…

And being moored to a titanic pier of a beautiful, awe-inspiring city built among the stars.

That last glimpse seemed especially significant, somehow.

Even consumed by the strain of staring at fate, Sunny could not help but feel a hint of bewildered amusement.

'Is Night Garden… a space ship, then?'

He spent a split second — which felt like an eternity — considering that fact.

And then…

Wham!

Sunny fell from the chair and slammed his head against the floor.

Pulled away from his bewitched state, he belatedly retracted his hand and deactivated [Where is my eye]?

The world… felt strange.

The world felt too small, claustrophobic, and two-dimensional.

Time was most bizarre, somehow separated into three distinct states.

The past, the present, and the future…

The inexplicable division seemed nonsensical.

"Ouch."

Laying on the floor, Sunny sensed the shadow of Jet move above him. He realized that she had struck him, overturning his chair and throwing him to the floor.

"Why did you hit me?"

Jet let out a bewildered laugh.

"Gods. Have you seen yourself?"

Sunny did not, in fact, see himself.

Actually, he could not see anything at all.

'What?'

Jet fell heavily on her sofa.

"For your information, there was smoke rising from beneath your mask. And the smell…'

She made a retching sound.

'Well. I guess that's one more accomplishment under my belt.'

Making a dead woman retch was no easy feat.

Belatedly, Sunny realized that he was drenched in sweat and could smell burned flesh.

Dismissing Weaver's Mask, he raised an arm, touched his face tentatively, and winced.

His mind was still reeling from beholding the great tapestry of fate, so he felt… dazed. That was a misleading word to describe his peculiar state, but he could not find a better one.

Sunny was so dazed, in fact, that he did not even register the physical pain he was experiencing.

But the area around his eyes was definitely burned.

His eyes were burned, as well. Luckily, they were still there, just scorched and unable to see anything.

'Ah...'

"It seems… that I've gone blind."

He sighed.

"How bothersome."

With that, Sunny rose, brushed his clothes with a shaking hand, picked up his chair, and sat back down.

Being blind was indeed a hassle, but he could function just fine with

just shadow sense. More than that, his eyes had only received mild damage — it was only mild thanks to a timely whack from Jet — and with his regenerative abilities, he would be fine in a few days.

Things could have been worse if he kept [Where is my eye?] active for a bit longer, though.

"Wow. You look frightening."

Jet shook her head.

Sunny tilted his own a little… which almost caused him to lose balance and fall back to the floor.

"Frightening?"

She nodded.

"It's like you have embers in your eyes. You are mostly black, with glowing orange cracks. What the hell did you do?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then spoke in a subdued tone:

"Well… I guess it was a divination, of sorts."

In fact, being able to touch the Strings of Fate and catch glimpses of their meaning was eerily similar to Cassie's Dormant Ability. Sunny was willing to bet that if the great tapestry of fate was still intact, he would have been able to receive visions of the future, as well.

'Huh. Does that make me an oracle, too?'

He shivered.

"A very extreme form of divination. I was trying to determine where the thing I am looking for is."

Jet seemed to have raised an eyebrow. Sunny was not sure, since he could only feel the motions of her shadow — and shadows, sadly, did not have eyebrows.

"And did you?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Sort of. I saw a thread… but that thread did not lead me to any particular area of the ship. Instead, it just sort of disappeared into the ship, and if pointing to it as a whole… or maybe inside of it."

Jet hesitated for a while.

"You don't think that you'll have to be absorbed into the hull to find it, do you?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"That was my first thought, as well. But actually, I have a different idea."

He considered it again, then thought back to the visions he had seen.

'Yeah. It is worth trying.'

The Night Garden was a living thing. Not in the same sense as humans or animals were, but still one nonetheless. It had been made from a branch of the World Tree and enchanted by the Demon of Repose to endlessly rejuvenate and restore itself. It was alive, but neither conscious nor sentient.

But if it was indeed alive…

Then did it dream of anything?

And could Sunny see what the titanic ship was dreaming of?

Of course, he could.

After all, Sunny had a horse who could bring him into someone's dream…

Chapter-2595: Hidden Giants

A storm raged outside.

The sky was hidden behind a great dark veil of angry clouds, hurricane winds were ravaging the world, and the boundless sea rose up against the tyranny of heaven. The undulating expanse of furious waves stretched endlessly in all directions, each of them towering like a rolling mountain.

The Night Garden sailed through the storm, indomitable and dauntless. Illuminated by the colorful glow of countless lanterns, it was the only island of warmth and light in the world of cold darkness… apart from the branching bolts of lightning that descended from the roaring sky like silver arrows, that was, as if meant to punish the sea for its defiance.

Instead of striking the sea, however, they were drawn to the masts of the Night Garden, making it seem as if the ancient vessel was surrounded by a radiant mantle of electric arcs as it battled the storm.

Each colossal wave was like the wall of a great fortress, dwarfing the world with its imposing height. The bow of the titanic ship, however, towered above them. It cut and crushed them like an unstoppable siege ram, moving forward at a steady pace.

The violence of each impact was terrifying, the roaring thunderclaps were deafening, the flashes of lightning were blinding…

Well, at least Sunny assumed they were.

His eyes had not recovered yet, and he fled from the physical pain by abandoning his corporeal form to hide in Jet's shadow. She was in the runic hall of the main pagoda at the moment, deftly steering the ship in its voyage through the calamitous storm.

The Night Garden had some defenses against the fury of the elements. There seemed to be an invisible barrier protecting the main deck of the titanic ship, making the winds less powerful as they assaulted it and preventing the torrential rain from causing a flood — to the point that many people gathered outside, hiding beneath colorful oil-paper umbrellas to enjoy the view of the storm.

However, that did not mean that the Night Garden was invulnerable. It could still be damaged, or even capsized, unless controlled by a steady hand. The bow of the ship had to be aimed at the waves, and it had to maintain a sufficient speed — countless things had to be considered, as well, to keep the passengers safe.

Jet seemed to be handling the task just fine, aided by several surviving elders of the House of Night who acted as her advisors.

The Night Garden was basking in the fury of the storm, replenishing its reserves of essence.

Sunny could not see the stunning battle between the titanic ship and the cataclysmic storm, but he could still sense its profundity. To him, it was a storm of shadows — vast and as deep as the sea, they flowed and roiled chaotically due to the unceasing barrage of lightning bolts and the passing of the titanic ship.

Observing the fury of the elements from the safety of Jet's shadow was strangely soothing.

After a while, the noise of the storm receded into the background of his mind, and Sunny was left alone with his thoughts.

He had a lot to think about.

Nightmare was ready to take him into the dreams of the Night Garden, but Sunny did not want to venture into unknown territory before recovering his eyesight. So, until then, there was nothing for him to do except think.

Beholding the great tapestry of fate had left a profound impression on him, even if it left him temporarily crippled. The damage to his eyes could have been worse, but it was not insignificant either — Sunny

would remain weakened for a few days, and there were the invisible wounds to consider, too.

Even now, his mental state was a bit strange. It was as if his mind had received a powerful shock, and was still a little numb as a result… who knew what would happen to it if he peered into fate often, and for prolonged periods of time?

'Come to think of it…'

Exploring the Strings of Fate was even more dangerous than Sunny thought. This time, he had seen the past of the Night Garden — which, unexpectedly, was intertwined with the past of the World Tree, an avatar of Heart God. He had seen the birth of the Sacred Forest and some of its long history, culminating in the creation of the titanic ship by the Demon of Repose…

But he could have just as easily stumbled onto visions of something that he was not meant to see.

What would have happened to Sunny if he caught a glimpse of Heart God battling the Creatures of the Void? What if he heard their profane names spoken aloud and was exposed to the forbidden knowledge of the Void?

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny trembled.

The Strings of Fate stretched far into the past, to the very dawn of time — and even beyond it, to the Age of Chaos.

That bygone era was a terrifying place, though. It was a time when man-eating giants struggled in the darkness… and that darkness was the only mercy offered to mortal men — if it was stripped and they beheld the hidden faces of the giants, the terror of the truth would drive them mad and haunt them till the end of days.

So, Sunny could not peer into the past recklessly.

'Goodness. I really am an oracle now.'

He let out a mental chuckle.

Still, it was a gift he could not refuse. The future was destroyed, but the ability to learn the secrets of the past alone was too important a boon. After all, knowledge was the origin of power, and even if there was a price to be paid for acquiring it, Sunny was ready to pay it.

Because eventually, he was bound to delve into the darkness and face the man-eating giants personally.

The ability to interact with the Strings of Fate had to become one of the tools in his arsenal. He just had to treat them with utmost caution, never reaching out to touch them recklessly.

The Strings of Fate…

Sunny remembered the sensation of the golden thread under his fingertips.

Back then, he had only slid his fingers along its length.

But could he do something else, too?

Chapter-2596: Weight of Fate

Although it seemed too mystical to be true, Sunny knew that the answer to that question was a resounding yes.

After all, Sun God had twisted the fates of the Chain Lords in on themselves to make Noctis, Solvane, Sevirax, and the rest immortal. Weaver, meanwhile, had woven the Strings of Fate to create the Nightmare Spell.

So, Sunny — the inheritor of Weaver's lineage — could weave the Strings of Fate, as well.

…In theory.

In practice, he had sensed something when touching the thread of golden light. It had felt like a physical object in his grasp, but it had also felt absolutely immovable. Not inherently so, but simply because it weighed as much as the world itself did.

Moving that single String of Fate, for him, was no different from an ant attempting to move a mountain with its feeble limbs.

'That is probably something only a Divine being can do.'

Even then, not just any Divine being… and among those great beings that could twist the Strings of Fate, none had been able to escape it, in the end, so the measure of their influence must have been limited.

'I feel like this is something I am not qualified to understand yet, let alone perform.'

In the future, though…

The future did not exist anymore, so anything was possible.

Satisfied with that conclusion, he thought back to the very fact that

the great tapestry of fate was torn and savaged.

It felt too strange to fathom, knowing that he was the person — or the weapon, at least — who had fundamentally altered one of the inherent pillars of existence. Among all of his accomplishments, that one stood out as the most distinguished by far. So much so that nothing else could even compare.

Granted, the Vile Thieving Bird deserved most of the credit, possibly followed by Weaver. Cassie and Sunny had done their part, and what they had done was nearly impossible… but it did not feel entirely, or even largely, like an achievement of their own.

So, Sunny was not going to let it go to his head.

Still, while the question of who had unraveled the tapestry of fate remained, the implications of its unraveling were apparent.

The future, which had been determined all along, flowing toward a predestined end — even if the details of how the world arrived at that end could shift — was undecided and malleable now.

Leaving the astonishing nature of that tectonic shift aside, it seemed like a positive change. But really, it was not necessarily so. After all, there were countless possible futures now: some of them could be more beneficial than what had been fated to transpire, but some were undoubtedly far more terrible.

There was simply no way to tell, since Sunny did not know what shape the original future had been meant to take, and there was no way to learn what final shape it would settle into anymore. For better or worse, they would only find out what the future held when it was upon them — they would only know if their intervention was a blessing or a bitter curse when there was no way to change it.

The future was just… uncertain and free, containing countless possibilities. So, it was up to Sunny and his companions to make sure that the future that ended up being realized was more hopeful than harrowing.

That heavy responsibility suited him fine.

Even if they failed in the end, and the world was consumed by the Nightmare that the Forgotten God was dreaming, he would at least know that they had strived for and failed to achieve a better ending themselves, not guided like puppets that performed a complicated play as their limbs were pulled by the Strings of Fate.

'The tapestry of fate may repair itself eventually, restoring a semblance of order… but it would never be the same.'

Letting out a mental sigh, Sunny turned his thoughts to the visions he had seen.

'Repose…'

It was a startling thing to learn, that the Demon of Repose was responsible for creating the very concept of changing seasons and had either caused or ended an ice age that threatened to consume all of existence… or maybe both.

It was also deeply fascinating to have witnessed the ancient past of the Heart Realm, especially considering that Sunny was currently waging a war for dominance over its charred remains. The Burned Forest had been the Sacred Forest once, and the unfathomably large stump at its center had been the World Tree, the avatar of Heart God.

Heart God…

The god of souls, emotions, memory, growth… and hunger.

That deity was the most nebulous and elusive of the six great gods, so Sunny had rarely stumbled upon traces of Heart God before.

There was Aidre of the Chain Lords and the Desecrated Grove, from where the sapling of the sacred tree empowering the Chain Breaker came. There was the tree to which Eurys and Azarax had been nailed for thousands of years, and which had prevented them from forgetting themselves like the rest of the deathless prisoners of the Nightmare Desert. There was the Burned Forest.

…There was the Soul Devourer, as well — which, as Sunny suspected now, was a sacred tree that had grown in the wake of the Doom War and succumbed to Corruption.

It was interesting to note, however, that the World Tree had been similar to the Soul Devourer in many ways. It had attracted many beings with the sweet scent of its fruit, after all, and many of those beings remained in the Heart Realm forever, helping the great tree grow and its offspring form the Sacred Forest.

Just like Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had almost remained on the Ashen Barrow to guard the Soul Devourer and help it spread its seeds forever.

The vision Sunny saw possessed a strange duality to it, so he could not tell if the avatar of Heart God had been benevolent and nurturing or insidious and harrowing. Perhaps it was both — the gods were beings born long before the concepts of good and evil, after all, and therefore existed outside of the confines of mundane morality. So, they were both and neither.

The World Tree and the Sacred Forest seemed to have found a state of balance eventually, though, after experiencing the long and dreadful ice age… with the help of the Demon of Repose.

Only to burn in the end.

Suddenly, Sunny remembered the descriptions of two Memories he had received a long time ago — the [Memory of Ice] and the [Memory of Fire]. They had been charms that increased his resistance to cold and heat, respectively, which he lost after being banished from the Nightmare Spell.

The description of the first had read: [...Even when the sun returned, they shivered and remembered the never-ending winter.]

While the description of the latter hinted at a different calamity: [...And then, there was nothing but flame.]

The descriptions were strange and fragmented, like two pieces of a larger whole. Sunny had even thought that if he could find the whole set of resistance charms, he would be able to learn the entire story.

Now, he suspected that this story told the tale of the inhabitants of the Sacred Forest — the primordial humans and the creatures who

had dwelled in the Heart Realm, and who probably built the barrows on the northern edges of the Forgotten Shore.

The God of Memory was gone, and these people were long gone, as well.

Now, the only thing that remembered them was the Nightmare Spell.

'How fitting...'

Chapter-2597: Inner Sea

A few days later, the storm subsided, revealing the starlit sky. The vast expanse of rolling water glistened with a silver radiance, reflecting the shimmering stars. Wisps of mist flowed above the water like clouds, making it seem as if the Night Garden was suspended between two nebulous heavens.

Sunny was starting to feel better by then.

Abandoning the peaceful embrace of Jet's shadow, he ventured to explore the ship — not because he expected to find something important, but simply out of curiosity. Avoiding the gazes of people living on the Night Garden, he moved stealthily here and there, eventually making his way to the lowest part of the living vessel.

'Quite ironic.'

There was a small sea hidden at the bottom of the Night Garden. Well, more of a lake, really — a vast reservoir spanned the entire length of the colossal ship, filled with water. There was a shore of pristine white dunes, as well. Enchanted lanterns were scattered across the ceiling of the reservoir, shining upon the black water like stars… it was a perfect microcosm of the restless sea outside.

Kneeling on the white sand, Sunny brought a handful of it to his face and licked it. A strange expression appeared on his face.

"Salt?"

Soft steps resounded from the darkness behind him, and Jet appeared on the silent shore, stretching as she raised a hand to hide a yawn. Each storm was a test of endurance for the captain of the Night Garden, so she had not had an opportunity to rest even for a minute until the storm subsided.

Noticing his confused expression, she nodded.

"Yes, it's salt."

Jet walked over to the water and splashed some on her face.

"The hull of the Night Garden absorbs salt water from the sea, purifies it, and then desalinates it. Once all contaminants are absorbed, the fresh water and the salt are stored separately in this reservoir. Where did you think people aboard the ship got water from?"

Sunny scratched his head.

"I haven't really thought about it. That's quite convenient."

Jet nodded.

"If not for that function, sustaining a large population here would have been a logistical nightmare. As it stands, though, we are almost self-sufficient. We even supply salt to other cities in the Dream Realm, so everyone on the coast is happy to see the Night Garden appear on the horizon."

Salt was the lifeblood of civilization, after all.

Sunny looked around with a thoughtful expression.

"Does it happen automatically, or do you control the water intake from the runic hall?"

Jet shrugged.

"The Night Garden handles it on its own. But I imagine I could take direct control and do it manually if I wanted to — that is how it works with most of its other functions. Why?"

Sunny looked up, studied the distant ceiling for a while, and then shook his head.

"Nothing, really. It's just that this reservoir is far from being filled to the brim. So, I was thinking that it looks like a ballast tank."

Jet studied him for a few moments.

"Like in a submarine?"

He nodded.

"Exactly. I am willing to bet that if you increased water intake and flooded this reservoir, the Night Garden would be able to dive into the depths. That is how it works, right? It only has to become heavier than the water it displaces to achieve negative buoyancy."

Sunny paused for a moment, then added:

"I am also willing to bet that the same barrier that protects the main deck from the wind and the rain can hold the water at bay, creating a bubble of breathable air around the ship. Oh… I don't have proof for any of that, of course. But it feels like something the Night Garden would be able to do."

Jet gave him a suspicious look.

"Why are you thinking about sinking my ship, though?"

Sunny chuckled.

"No reason. I'm just bored and curious."

Jet sighed.

"Well… you might be right. Honestly, I feel like we haven't discovered everything that the Night Garden can do yet, by far — or at least what it could do. It might not look like it from the outside, but this ship is actually heavily damaged and in a state of disrepair. Has been from the very day the Nightwalker conquered it, after thousands of years of neglect. And none of us are powerful enough or knows enough to fix it."

She looked at the vast expanse of dark water.

"Others can't tell, but as its captain, I feel it every time I step into the runic circle. How tired and worn down many of its parts are."

Jet lingered for a moment, then smiled.

"In any case, I am not planning to send the Night Garden into the depths. I spent several months as a sea nomad in my Third Nightmare, you know? Living on the back of an aquatic monster, with no land anywhere in sight. In my experience, all things that come from the depths tend to try to eat you, so thanks, but no thanks."

Sunny gave her a funny look.

"Hey, I think we have the same experience! Actually, I hate water. The only thing worse than water… is deep water, I'd say."

Jet raised an eyebrow.

"Then what are you doing in the middle of the Stormsea?"

Sunny smiled.

"Well, it's because my greed tramples my fear. Every damn time."

Turning away from the dark expanse of fresh water, Sunny looked at Jet.

His vision had improved enough to actually discern her features, which was a good sign. So, he figured that there was no sense in postponing what he wanted to do anymore.

"Anyway. I am going to explore what the Night Garden is dreaming about. Care to join me?"

Jet remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"It's my ship. Of course, I am going to join you."

Sunny nodded.

"Let's go, then."

As he said that, Nightmare silently rose from the shadows and stared at Jet with his frightening crimson eyes. She stared back, wisps of

mist drifting around her.

"Sunny… your horse is looking at me funny."

Fastening the Overpriced Saddle, he smiled.

"He's just happy to see you. Right, Nightmare?"

Nightmare snorted, revealing his steel wolf-like fangs for a moment.

Jet cleared her throat.

"Yeah, I don't think this is it…"

Jumping into the saddle, Sunny looked down at her and offered her his hand.

"Climb up. Don't worry, he doesn't bite… I mean, he does, but only when he wants to kill someone. So, relax."

Giving him a dark look, Jet took his hand and climbed to sit behind him.

"Why do you have a Transcendent Terror as a horse, even?"

Sunny grinned.

"Well, if you must know, it's because I endured countless excruciating deaths in a maze of nightmares, broke free through sheer stubbornness, and then killed him viciously. So, this Terror is my horse now. Hold on tight!"

As Jet wrapped her arms around his waist, Sunny sent Nightmare forward and commanded him to use the [Dreamwalker] Attribute.

The next moment, they disappeared from the shore of the dark lake.

Chapter-2598: Dreams of the Night Garden

In the Night Garden's dream, it was a tree.

A towering tree that stood upon the surface of a calm sea, bathing in starlight and caressed by warm winds. Millions of leaves rustled on its branches peacefully, echoing the distant murmur of the gentle waves. Far away, storm clouds were gathering with the promise of a cleansing rain.

Nightmare appeared on a wide branch of the titanic tree, surrounded by shadows. Sunny looked around and remained silent for a while. A strange expression appeared on his face.

"Well, that is… odd."

Jet, who seemed quite uncomfortable atop a horse, let go of his waist and jumped down. Touching the weathered bark of the enormous branch briefly, she looked up and asked in an incredulous tone:

"What? Traveling to the dream of an ancient living ship?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No? That's perfectly normal."

He paused for a few moments, casting his shadow sense far and wide, then sighed.

"It's just that when I follow Nightmare into someone's dream, it is usually… you know, a nightmare."

Relaxing a little, Sunny dismounted and patted his tenebrous steed on the shoulder.

"Full of horrors, peril, and nightmarish things. It's very rarely that I encounter a dream that is so… peaceful."

The dream of the Night Garden was indeed tranquil. Considering what the ancient vessel had lived through and witnessed, Sunny was fully prepared to face unimaginable horrors — hideous depth dwellers, devastating calamities, and maybe even an angry god or two.

But instead, there was nothing but a beautiful night sky and a calm sea. No horrors were hiding beneath the waves, and nothing too grotesque to describe was watching them from above with alien eyes.

He hesitated for a little while, studying the towering tree they were standing upon.

It was far taller than the Soul Devourer had been in its last moments, but nowhere near as colossal as the World Tree. If he had to compare it to anything, it would be the giant tree growing at the center of Ariel's Game.

Still…

It was interesting to see that the Night Garden saw itself as a tree, at least in its dreams.

A thriving tree, at that.

There were some parts of it that seemed diseased, with grey bark and rotting branches. But largely, the Night Garden seemed to be full of vibrancy and life.

The branches were brimming with young buds, ready to sprout new leaves and flowers. Here and there, succulent fruits could be seen, bathing in the starlight.

Jet looked around as well, her gaze eventually landing on the largest and most delicious-looking fruit, which hung not too far away from them. It had a bluish sheen to it, emanating a cold air and surrounded by ethereal wisps of smoke.

Her expression changed subtly.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"You are not planning on eating it, are you? These are not real fruit. They are simply a dream… so, they won't satiate you."

As much as Sunny wanted to believe that eating a mystical dream fruit would grant him some kind of power, he knew that it was wishful thinking. This was a mundane dream after all, even if a mystical being was dreaming it — not a Nightmare created by the Spell.

So even if he had received the Soul Weave by eating a fruit in a Nightmare, eating one in this dream would not benefit him in any way.

And since the Night Garden was dreaming peacefully, there was nothing here for Nightmare — the Shadow — to battle and subjugate here, either.

There seemed to be nothing for him to earn in the dream of the Night Garden.

Jet remained silent for a while, then slowly shook her head.

"No. It's just that…"

She hesitated for a bit, then pointed to the beautiful fruit.

"I think that's me."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Pardon?"

Jet nodded.

"Yes. I think that this fruit is meant to represent me."

Sunny's expression only grew more incredulous.

'Is she… comparing herself to a beautiful, succulent fruit? What is happening?'

Jet scoffed.

"I don't know what you are thinking about, but please stop. Instead, think about what the Night Garden sees itself as."

She raised her hand, gesturing to the branches of the great tree that surrounded them.

"For us, it is a mysterious vessel that shelters us, and which we control. But as far as the Night Garden seems to be concerned, it is a tree. What does that make us, its passengers, then?"

She smiled faintly.

"I believe it thinks about us as parts of itself — which it must protect and nurture. Well, I suppose the Night Garden can't actually think. So, saying that it feels that way about us would probably be more correct."

Jet pointed to the rustling leaves.

"Each leaf represents a person living on the Night Garden. While some of us, those who are of higher Ranks, are represented by the flowers and the fruit."

Sunny looked around, bewilderment apparent on his face, then glanced at the biggest, most beautiful, and most delicious-looking fruit.

"So… what you're saying is that the Night Garden likes you the most?"

Jet coughed, then offered him a nonchalant shrug.

"Naturally. Because I'm the captain."

Or maybe it was simply because the Night Garden had a soft spot for her. Sunny would not be surprised if it did — Soul Reaper was quite a likable person, after all. He could attest to that fact himself.

He remained silent for a while, contemplating. If Jet was correct and the titanic ship considered its passengers as leaves, flowers, and fruit

that grew on its branches and had to be nurtured…

Then it must have been terribly lonely for all these years, including the short span of years when only the members of the House of Night populated its spacious decks and cavernous holds. Not to mention the time when the only being aboard it was Mordret.

The dreams of the Night Garden must have been far more wistful back then.

'It's nice that the ship is content now, I guess.'

In any case, that information was of no help to him, as far as searching for the traces left behind by Weaver was concerned.

Unless, of course…

Suddenly feeling paranoid, Sunny gulped.

"Hey, Jet… you don't think that we'll find a giant, rotten fruit infested by repulsive maggots somewhere in here, and that would be how we learn that some dreadful, abominable horror has been hiding aboard the Night Garden the whole time?"

Jet gave him a long look.

Then, she turned away with a deadpan expression.

"You know, Sunny, you should really learn to keep some thoughts to yourself. I don't know if we'll find such a fruit, but if we do…"

She smiled darkly.

"I will definitely be blaming you."

Chapter-2599: The Flaw in Our Stars

For better or for worse, they did not find such a dreadful fruit on the branches of the Night Garden. It was fortunate, of course, that there were no terrible abominations hiding aboard the ancient ship, but Sunny found himself facing a dilemma. The problem was that they did not find anything of note at all while exploring the wondrous dream.

It was just quiet and tranquil. The rustling of leaves, the distant murmur of the waves, the gentle wind, and the falling rays of silver starlight — that was all there was to the dream of the Night Garden, which slumbered peacefully as its great mass sailed the tumultuous waters of the Stormsea.

Perhaps it was only to be expected, considering that the being dreaming that dream was not exactly sentient, let alone sapient.

'At least someone is dreaming peacefully.'

Sunny sighed.

The tree was immense, but it was not vast enough for a Sovereign and a Saint to miss something important. Standing on one of the lower branches, Sunny looked at the calm surface of the distant sea below.

The roots of the Night Garden must have extended far down… was he going to have to dive into the depths, after all?

As Sunny was considering his options with a sullen face, the leaves rustled, and Jet landed softly on the weathered bark beside him. As she did, he observed something curious — the leaves, as well as the smaller branches of the Night Garden, seemed to bend slightly

toward her, as if drawn to her tantalizing figure.

If that was not the Night Garden playing favorites and giving its captain special treatment, then Sunny did not know what was.

...He might have been sulking a little because there did not seem to be a fruit anywhere here representing him. Sunny knew for a fact that he was quite delicious — why else would countless creatures have tried to eat him?

'What a silly ship...'

Jet straightened and gave him a neutral look.

"Well? Did you find anything?"

Sunny coughed, embarrassed by his thoughts, and slowly shook his head.

"Not really. Ah… I am starting to doubt my initial assumption. What about you? Have you discovered something?"

They had split up after the initial sweep. Sunny went to explore the lower branches of the Night Garden, while Jet climbed to the top. Nightmare followed her in the shadows, just in case something did happen and she needed help.

But nothing had happened, in the end.

Jet hesitated for a few moments.

"I am not sure. Maybe?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How do you mean?"

She considered something, then gestured up.

"Follow me. It will be easier to show you."

He did with a shrug.

Together, they climbed the great tree. Of course, the Night Garden was too tall, standing higher than the most towering mountain on Earth, to be scaled like an ordinary tree… or even an ordinary mountain. But Sunny and Jet were not ordinary people, either.

They leapt from one branch to another, covering hundreds of meters of vertical distance with each leap and only pausing for a brief moment before taking the next one. The great branches streaked past them, and the leaves rustled from their passing, disturbed by the turbulent currents of wind.

Although not the most practical, this way of ascending the immense height of the Night Garden was the simplest.

Well, and it was also a bit exhilarating.

'Look at me, having fun in a giant ship's dream.'

Sunny smiled slightly, thinking that he understood why Nightmare enjoyed galloping at terrible speed so much.

Some time later, they finally reached the top of the colossal tree. Its vast trunk was thinner there, and the canopy was not as thick, revealing the clear picture of the beautiful night sky.

Sunny suddenly felt wary, looking around with a tense expression.

He almost expected to see an enormous nest, and find a murderous egg laying on the bed of spiderwebs inside… but luckily, the Vile Thieving Bird did not seem to have visited the dreams of the Night Garden in the past.

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"What exactly am I looking at?"

Jet pointed up once again.

"The sky."

He frowned, then followed her finger to the dark vista of the night sky.

There was no light pollution in the dream of the Night Garden to make stars seem feeble and pale, and since Sunny and Jet were quite high, they looked huge.

The breathtaking tapestry of silver stars stretched above the great tree, many of them connected by long trails of cosmic fog. All together, the stars and the shimmering nebulae looked like a painting drawn by the hand of a genius artist, their vast expanse suffused with darkness, light, and mystery in equal measure.

Sunny's eyes glistened.

'Wait…'

Jet shrugged.

"They don't look like any of the stars I have seen. And, how should I put it… there's something strange about them? It is as if there is a pattern hidden in the constellations, although if there is, I don't know what kind."

Sunny lingered for a while, the stars reflecting in his onyx eyes, and then smiled faintly.

"That's alright. I know what the pattern is."

She looked at him in surprise.

"You do?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. It's a weave."

Indeed, there was an image of a mysterious spellweave hidden in the stars of the Night Garden's dream. No one except for Sunny would have discerned the subtle order in the seemingly chaotic scattering of constellations and the trails of radiant fog blooming around them, and even then, it would have taken him a great amount of time to decipher the pattern without Mind Weave.

But Sunny was quite an accomplished weaver by now, and he did

possess Mind Weave. So, he recognized the anchors of the celestial spellweave almost immediately — after that, tracing all its twists and turns was not that hard.

The spellweave was vast and intricately complicated, endlessly elegant in its design, and daunting… it felt like something the Spell would weave, but was even more refined.

Despite its complexity and scale, however, it was relatively simple — easily within the boundaries of what Sunny could replicate.

Jet raised an eyebrow.

"A weave?"

Reluctantly looking away from the radiant pattern hidden in the depths of the dark sky, Sunny remained silent for a moment and then nodded.

"Rather, it is an image of a weave. Spellweaves are what make the Memories and the Echoes work — they are a form of long-lost sorcery that a select few practiced once, in the ancient past. That sorcery originates from Weaver, the Demon of Fate… and Weaver did not create it to be used by the masses. So, unlike runic sorcery and Shaping, not just anyone can master even its basics."

Jet gave him a dubious look.

"So, what's the use of this hidden pattern?"

Sunny smiled.

"Well, as it happens, it's quite useful. Because I just happen to be the only weaver in existence. And I haven't just mastered the basics… as far as Weaver's sorcery goes, I am quite the master."

Looking at the starlit sky once again, he said in a subdued tone:

"What I am trying to say is that I can use this pattern as a blueprint to create some kind of spell."

There was the question of whether he should, of course. Blindly

giving shape to a mysterious spell hidden in the dreams of a living ship was not exactly a wise course of action — it smelled of recklessness, rather.

But who was he kidding?

Sunny had come to the Night Garden to find a clue leading to a fragment of Weaver's lineage, and now, he found the blueprint of a spellweave conveniently hidden on the ship's dreams. One had to be a fool not to realize that this spell had been left here by Weaver to give his future heir a sign.

Jet frowned.

"And what will that spell do?"

Sunny looked at her and grinned.

"There is only one way to find out, isn't there?"

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In the end, it took Sunny a few days to complete the mysterious spellweave.

He had secluded himself in Jet's garden and dedicated himself fully to weaving, meticulously recreating the vast intricacy of the pattern Weaver had hidden in the starlit sky.

He used strings of shadow essence to form the strings, and the soul shards of sea monsters Jet and Nightmare hunted for him to form the anchors of the complicated pattern.

Since the weave needed a vessel to exist — at least as far as Sunny was concerned — he used a long branch from one of the sacred trees Jet had transplanted into her garden, which he fashioned into a staff.

All of them were children of the tree growing on the Chain Breaker and quite young, but their wood was resilient and possessed mystical qualities needed to contain a powerful enchantment.

When the weave was complete, Sunny and Jet looked at the simple

wooden staff he was holding with complicated expressions.

"This thing… is not going to blow up my ship, is it?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"What? No, of course not."

As Jet let out a relieved sigh, he added:

"At best, it will blow up a small part of your ship."

Jet's icy blue eyes widened, but before she could say anything, Sunny poured his essence into the staff and activated its enchantment.

In the next moment…

The Night Garden did not explode.

Countless stars in the night sky exploded instead.

'...Oops.'

Chapter-2600: Star Map

Dozens of constellations shimmering on the vast velvet expanse of the night sky exploded. Some stars were extinguished, while some bloomed with shining auroras, as if experiencing a glorious moment of radiant brilliance as they collapsed in a splendid display of self-destruction.

Or at least they seemed to.

'Wait, that does not make any sense.'

The enchantment Sunny had activated was consuming a vast amount of his essence, but still, he was not powerful enough to extinguish countless stars. Even if he was, nothing would have changed in the night sky — the stars scattered across its dark expanse were unfathomably far away, after all.

Their light took years to travel across the vast emptiness of space… at least that was how things worked in the waking world. Even if Sunny had indeed destroyed a few stars, he would only see a visible change in the night sky years or even decades later.

Of course, it was theoretically possible that the spell left behind by Weaver had reached through time and destroyed these stars at various points in the distant past, so that the spectacle of their passing became visible all at once just now. But that… that seemed like too much effort, even for the treacherous Demon of Fate.

Especially since there seemed to be no obvious result, beneficial or otherwise, to the strange change in the night sky. It was pretty to look at, but beyond that, nothing seemed to be happening.

"Sunny… what the hell did you do?"

He lingered for a few moments, studying the strange pattern of the

vanished and blazing stars, then cleared his throat.

"I am… not entirely sure? I just activated the enchantment."

Far below, on the decks of the Night Garden, people were gathering and gesturing at the sky, surprised by the beautiful sight. They seemed to be enjoying the unexpected spectacle quite a bit.

Sunny glanced at the wooden staff in his hand, feeling it consume his essence continuously. He would not have been able to sustain this mysterious enchantment for a long time as a Saint, but now that he was a Supreme, it was of no consequence. More essence poured into his soul, replenishing his reserves almost instantly.

"The enchantment does not seem to be dangerous. At the same time, I have no idea what its purpose is. How mysterious."

Jet sighed, then looked at the shimmering night sky with a thoughtful expression.

She contemplated its dark depths for a while, then said in a hesitant tone:

"Well, whatever its purpose is, it must be connected to the Stormsea."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"In what way?"

Jet looked at him with a neutral expression.

"You don't know much about where we are, do you?"

When Sunny answered, his tone was a little offended:

"I know quite a lot, actually. It's just that most of my knowledge about the Stormsea is theoretical, since I consciously tried to stay as far away from this place as possible. Nothing good ever happens when I am near large bodies of water… and since this one is the largest and most dreadful of them all, you can imagine my reluctance to get entangled with it!"

He gave her an indignant stare and thought back to what he knew about the Stormsea.

After a short pause, Sunny added:

"Do you mean that it has to do with navigation?"

Jet nodded.

"Yes… the Stormsea is not like any other place in the Dream Realm. It's quite treacherous, as far as navigating its waters goes — and I don't mean because of the terrible abominations, the dreadful storms, and the thick mist that tends to obscure everything for days, or even weeks on end."

She sighed.

"Rather, space itself behaves strangely in the Stormsea. Nothing ever stays in the same place for long here, and things tend to shift around in relation to each other. You might sail in a straight line for a week, and end up in the same spot you started from… that is the best-case scenario. You might also plot a course to a safe harbor, but end up in previously unexplored waters that teem with all kinds of ghastly Nightmare Creatures and unimaginable horrors. That happens far more frequently."

Jet looked at the starlit sky.

"That is why Nightwalkers are so important."

Sunny knew that the Nightwalkers — a title given to certain members of the House of Night in honor of its founder — were able to guide ships through the mists of the Stormsea. In fact, they did the same for mundane ships in the Indian Ocean and were generally good at finding their way around.

That was not surprising, considering that they had inherited the lineage of Storm God, who was also known as the Goddess of the Black Skies — the goddess of depths, oceans, darkness, stars, travel, and guidance.

…And disaster.

In any case, he knew that the ability to navigate the sea by stars was one of the inherent abilities of many members of the House of Night. The skies above the Stormsea were not mundane, either — they were as mystical and treacherous as the misty waters below, so not just anyone could observe them to plot a reliable course.

And since the mysterious enchantment Weaver had left behind seemed to have changed the geography of the night sky…

"Do you think that this staff shows a path to somewhere?"

That was the most reasonable conclusion he could make.

Weaver had left an image of a strange spellweave in the skies that the Night Garden dreamed about. Once realized, this spellweave altered the real sky, making it seem as if some stars had been extinguished, while some burned brighter.

The stars were the only way to navigate the Stormsea, and therefore… the beautiful spectacle above them could be a map, of sorts.

Sunny had no idea where that map led to, but he was pretty sure that the fragment of Weaver's lineage he was searching for would be there, in that mysterious place.

Jet lingered for a while, then shrugged.

"Actually, I can navigate the Stormsea as well, somewhat. That is one of the privileges granted to the captain of the Night Garden. But I am not very experienced in reading the stars yet — so, I can't really tell if this enchantment shows a path to somewhere."

She glanced at him, then smiled slightly.

"However, I know a few people who can."

Chapter-2601: Night Guides

Soon enough, Sunny found himself hiding in the shadows of a spacious chamber on one of the upper floors of the Mainmast Pagoda, not far below Jet's private garden. Jet herself was leaning back on a chair, looking out the window with a relaxed expression on her pale, beautiful face.

There was a knock on the door, and a few moments later, it opened, revealing a few familiar faces.

Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether — the last Saints of the fallen House of Nights. Sunny did not know the last one personally, but he had heard a lot of good things about the outstanding young man, who used to be the most promising scion of a Great Clan once.

Well… technically speaking, Saint Aether wasn't that young anymore. If he was considered young, then so was Sunny, and Sunny did not feel like a young man at all. If anything, he felt ancient. He felt way too old to be dealing with all this crap.

'Ah, I suddenly feel for the captain of the Homicide Division, back in Mirage City...'

His questionable relationship with age was probably the consequence of living seven lives at the same time and containing a legion of dead shadows in his soul.

That, and the countless forgotten years he had spent in the Tomb of Ariel.

In any case, the House of Night had been absorbed into the government and was now a part of its forces. So, these three proud Legacy Saints were Jet's subordinates — which was a good thing, considering that they were the best candidates to solve the riddle that Weaver had left in the night sky.

There were other surviving members of the House of Night bearing the title of Nightwalkers, but none were as powerful and knowledgeable as these three.

Jet smiled.

"Gentlemen. Please, have a seat."

They must have witnessed the celestial conflagration that had happened earlier, so there was little point in postponing the discussion. Sunny barely suppressed his curiosity... but before Jet could broach the topic, Bloodwave asked in a somber tone:

"Is it true, Soul Reaper?"

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"What, exactly, are you talking about?"

The three Saints glanced at each other. Eventually, it was Naeve who spoke, his voice just as grim as his uncle's.

"That monster, Mordret of Nowhere. Are the rumors true? He is a Supreme now, and Lady Nephis struck a deal with him?"

The rumors seemed to have reached the Night Garden, already. Hidden in the shadows, Sunny sighed.

He himself was uncomfortable with the uneasy alliance between the Human Domain and Mordret. Few people trusted the King of Nothing… but no one had suffered from his wicked ways like the surviving members of the House of Night had.

So, it was only natural that they would be unhappy with the news of his ascension to the throne of Supremacy, let alone of the deal between him and Changing Star.

Jet studied the Saints of Night with a neutral expression, then shrugged.

"It's true."

They were dismayed. Even Aether, who usually maintained nearly flawless decorum, allowed emotion to show on his face.

"How can this be?"

The air in the room had turned noticeably chilly and heavy with tension.

Jet let out a long sigh, then looked at them with a dark expression.

"Why, what did you want her to do?"

She leaned back and crossed her legs.

"Did you want her to start a new war, perhaps? It has not even been two years since the mess in Godgrave, but I guess another war between Supremes is just what we need."

Naeve frowned.

"That's a very callous way of looking at things, Jet. You know what that man has done — to us, and to all of humanity as well. Lady Nephis cannot trust him. He must be eradicated."

Jet smiled darkly.

"I know, Naeve. But I also know that he is immortal, Supreme, wields a Divine Aspect, and inhabits millions of vessels. Who is going to eradicate him? You, me? Or do you want Nephis to kill him, somehow, while we cheer her on from the sidelines?"

Naeve gritted his teeth, unable to find an answer.

In that silence, Bloodwave murmured in his deep voice:

"Is that such a big deal, though? She killed two Supremes before, and seemingly without much trouble…"

It was obvious he was simply venting, so no one took his words seriously.

Sunny was a bit hurt, though.

'Hey!'

Sure, from the sidelines, it must have looked like Nephis finished him off easily. But even if the whole thing had been an act, he still had his pride.

'Should I have resisted a bit more before being cut down?'

Sunny shook his head, then assumed a tangible form.

"Actually, she only killed one Supreme."

Walking out from the shadows, he offered the Saints of Night a smile and sat down near Jet. Noticing their confusion, he then realized that they probably had no idea who he was.

'Oh. Awkward.'

After all, very few people had known Master Sunless — and most of them had only seen him from afar on a calamitous battlefield.

'Well, apart from the regulars of the Eye Candy Cafe… the Brilliant Emporium, I mean the Brilliant Emporium cafe!'

In any case, for most, the Lord of Shadows was associated with his fearsome mask. The Sains of Night had not participated in the Godgrave military campaign, so they would not have met either of his incarnations.

So, Sunny smiled and offered helpfully:

"Oh, I am the Lord of Shadows. You can call me Lord Shadow, or simply Shadow. I also respond to the Dark Lord. Or Sunny."

The three Saints stared at him with wide eyes.

Sunny's smile dimmed a little. He cleared his throat.

"As you can see, the news of my death was grossly exaggerated… well, actually, I did die for a bit. But being dead grew old pretty quickly, so now I'm back."

He remained silent for a few moments and then added in a light tone:

"So, as far as killing Supremes goes, Nephis and I are tied for first place. For now, we are."

Chapter-2602: Lost Among the Waves

Despite Sunny's friendly tone, the Saints of Night did not seem inclined to respond in kind. They stared at him with expressions of somber apprehension, not saying anything.

The silence was a little heavy.

Eventually, they turned to Jet.

Bloodwave was the one to speak first, his tone wary:

"Soul Reaper… what is the meaning of this?"

She met his gaze, held it for a few moments, then chuckled.

"Oh, relax. He's on our side."

It probably looked like she was conspiring against Nephis with an old enemy who had mysteriously risen from the grave.

The two of them shared that last part in common, strangely enough.

And if Jet was conspiring against the Immortal Flame clan, then it was safe to say that the government had secretly switched sides, as well — she was its de facto leader, after all. Obviously, Saints of Night would feel a great amount of apprehension, considering that they, their families, and all the survivors of the fallen Great Clan were part of the government now.

It seemed that they did not wish to become traitors to the Human Domain, which warmed Sunny's heart a little.

He shrugged.

"For reasons that I am not too keen on explaining, the Lord of Shadows had to be considered dead. So, Nephis and I pulled a little prank and convinced everyone that I died. In truth, however, we've been working side by side... very closely, I might add... ever since. One Sovereign guides humanity in the sunlight, the other helps it from the shadows. Something like that — granted, I am somewhat limited in what I can do."

Looking at the somber faces of the three Saints, he shook his head.

"Needless to say, you will need to keep my existence to yourself. I would not have revealed myself in front of you if I didn't believe that you could keep a secret, but still, it is worth saying aloud. Do not mention the fact that I am not entirely dead to anyone, please — including those you implicitly trust. Everyone will be safer that way."

He lingered for a moment, studying their faces, then chuckled.

"No, but… why do you look so glum? These are not at all the expressions of people who have just learned that humanity is actually twice as strong as they had believed."

Naeve shook his head slowly.

"I am sorry, Lord Shadow. Sunny? It's just… a lot to take in."

Sunny smiled, hiding his bitterness at not being recognized by his old war buddy.

He forced himself to think about something else.

'Now that's a reaction!'

The daughters of Ki Song had been so nonchalant about his stunning resurrection… except for Death Singer, who immediately proposed.

'I should probably be happy that none of these three is confessing, I guess?'

He sighed.

"Regarding that bastard, Mordret: believe me, I'd love to see him

gone as well. However, what we want and what reality dictates do not always coincide. I understand your desire to exact revenge, but at the moment, attempting to dispose of him would only invite disaster. You lost family members to his machinations… but you also have family members left to protect. Considering that the world is literally coming undone as we watch, I suggest you concentrate on that."

An uneasy silence settled in the meeting chamber. Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether wore grim expressions, but his words seemed to have reminded them what was at stake.

Eventually, Aether spoke up, his voice quiet and reserved:

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Lord Shadow. To what do we owe the honor of hosting you aboard the Night Garden?"

The youngest of the three Saints, at least, seemed to be ready to face reality. Sunny knew that Naeve would follow suit, as well — he had his daughter to protect, after all. And if the two of them made peace with the current situation, Bloodwave would follow suit.

He smiled faintly.

"I am glad that you asked. In fact, I am searching for something — something that I believe will help us weather the storms ahead better. I thought that it would be hidden on the Night Garden, but as it turned out, there was only a clue to where I must go… or rather, a map. You've seen what happened to the sky, right?"

Naeve nodded slowly.

"Of course. Everyone saw. Is that why we were called?"

He paused for a moment and then smiled bitterly.

"I guess it makes sense. Who else but us?"

Jet looked at him with a hint of compassion and said in a neutral tone:

"Indeed. We think that the stars are showing a path to… somewhere. So, I need your help to read the constellations — to determine if it is

indeed a map, as well as where it leads to."

The three Saints looked at each other.

Strangely enough, they kept silent for a long time. Sunny did not think that they had a reason to refuse to help, and on top of that, they seemed to be quite friendly with Jet… Naeve's daughter even treated her like an aunt. So, he was surprised at their hesitance.

The reason why they had hesitated, however, surprised him even more.

After a long while, Naeve finally spoke, looking at Jet and Sunny with a complicated expression:

"It is a star map, without a doubt. As for where it leads to… there's no need to guess. We already know."

Sunny and Jet looked at each other, surprise apparent on their faces.

"You know?"

Naeve nodded slowly.

"The House of Night used to possess a map just like this one… a long time ago. It was one of the most important relics of our clan. Sadly, it disappeared along with our leader, Nightwalker."

Bloodwave's face fell at the mention of the founder of the House of Night.

Sunny scratched the tip of his nose.

"So where do the stars point?"

Naeve inhaled deeply.

"They point to the Eternal City… a mythical place lost among the waves. That was where the Night Garden was built, and that is where the lineage of Storm God is hidden, as well."

Chapter-2603: Immortal Abode

Sunny remained silent for a long while, a little confused by Naeve's words. There was something odd about them…

Eventually, he frowned.

"Wait, did you say that it is hidden there? Not that it was hidden?"

Naeve looked at Aether and Bloodwave, then nodded.

"Yes. The lineage of Storm God is not like the rest. The rest of them, as far as we know, came from Lineage Memories that outstanding individuals — or maybe simply lucky ones — earned either in the First Nightmare or while exploring the Dream Realm and conquering the first Citadels of humanity. But the source of the lineage of Storm God is not a Memory. It is a place."

Sunny just stared at him in surprise.

A faint smile appeared on Naeve's face.

"After all, the existence of the House of Night is a bit of a contradiction, isn't it? As you might know, initially, it was an alliance of lesser clans populating the Stormsea — created in large part to answer the rising influence of powerful factions like Valor or Immortal Flame. There was no blood relation between the various families forming the House of Night, so how did we all come to share the lineage of Storm God?"

He coughed.

"I know that there are a lot of salacious rumors about Nightwalker, but no, he did not conceive children with women from each of the founding families. Although there have been many internal marriages between the various branches of the House of Night since then, he

only had one child of his own."

A shadow briefly ran across his face. Naeve paused for a few moments, then sighed.

"However, he did share the lineage of Storm God with the other founding families of the House of Night. To explain how it was possible, I will have to divulge the most guarded secrets of our clan… I would have asked you to keep it, but I guess it does not matter anymore, now that the House of Night is no more."

Bloodwave grimaced at his words, but did not say anything. Aether, meanwhile, looked away with a wistful expression.

Jet shook her head.

"The House of Night might not be an independent force anymore, but it still exists. Don't sell yourself short."

Naeve offered her a brief smile.

"Thank you for saying that. In any case… the House of Night and the Eternal City are inseparably intertwined, because that was where our clan was born. Back then, Nightwalker was sent to the Eternal City on his first winter solstice. Other Sleepers were, as well, but he was the only one who survived — and the only reason he survived was because he fled that dreadful place aboard the Night Garden, which had been drifting in the waters nearby."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How dangerous is this Eternal City, exactly?"

Naeve hesitated.

"Nobody knows for sure, because Nightwalker rarely spoke about it. He was not a very social person, in general. However, the greatest treasures of the House of Night all came from the Eternal City — the Night Garden, the lineage of Storm God, and the map charting the course back to its shores."

He paused for a moment, and then looked at the stars beyond the

window.

"As far as we know, the Eternal City used to be an immortal abode — a utopia that death could not reach, where enlightened beings lived in peace and prosperity for countless years, reborn anew every time their bodies and souls grew frail with age. It was also a place where weary deities came to rest. That was a long time ago, though… nobody really knows what hides in the depths of the Eternal City today. Even Nightwalker himself only saw a few areas on its outer edges — the piers, the wharf… and the lighthouse."

Sunny studied him with a curious expression.

"What about the lineage of Storm God, then? Where did he find out, and how did he share it with other people?"

Naeve remained silent for a few moments, then looked at Bloodwave.

"I think my uncle will know better, since he was one of those who received the lineage directly."

Bloodwave frowned, then let out a long sigh.

"Well. As that scoundrel Nightwalker told it, the lighthouse of the Eternal City is also a temple — a temple dedicated to Storm God. It does not shine with ordinary light. Instead, a star is trapped within it… that star is the source of the lineage. Anyone who finds their way to the Eternal City and enters the Lighthouse will be bathed in its silver light. Then, they would be reborn as descendants of Storm God."

He paused for a moment, and then added somberly:

"...Or die. Many do."

Naeve nodded.

"Yes. Nightwalker entered the Lighthouse and survived. He also received the lineage of Storm God, which eventually allowed him to escape the Eternal City — before escaping, however, he collected a bit of that starlight into a special Memory. In the end, the Memory made it possible for the founding members of the House of Night to

receive the lineage, as well… even if a few of them perished in the process."

Sunny inhaled deeply. Naeve confirmed something that he suspected all along: that not just anyone was fit to receive the lineage of a god. Sunny had felt it himself, all those years ago, when absorbing Blood Weave — he had just barely survived the process, and that was despite possessing an innate affinity to fate, and therefore sharing some degree of kinship with Weaver.

Not to mention wielding a Divine Aspect.

Warden of Valor, Immortal Flame, Nightwalker, Ki Song, and the unknown Awakened who had inherited the lineage of Heart God to later pass it on to Asterion — each of them had been a special person. It was no coincidence that they had earned Lineage Memories, so it was no surprise that they survived using them.

The founding members of the House of Night were different, though. Unlike those who received a Lineage Memory after being judged worthy of it by the Spell, they — just like the daughters of Ki Song — were exposed to a divine lineage arbitrarily.

To some of them, it had become a deadly gift… and those were already people sent to the Stormsea by the Nightmare Spell, so they had to have possessed some degree of affinity to the various aspects of Storm God.

…What did that make Sunny, though?

'The Drop of Ichor gave me a lineage that eats other lineages.'

It seemed that, just like in all things, he had been both incredibly lucky and terribly unfortunate when receiving his lineage.

'Go figure…'

Chapter-2604: Mindset of a Sovereign

After remaining silent for a while, Sunny spoke in a contemplative tone:

"I am guessing that the starlight stolen by Nightwalker was not infinite, though."

Naeve nodded.

"Indeed. The light contained within the Star Lantern was merely a wisp, so it was exhausted eventually — Aether was the last person to have benefited from it directly."

He paused for a moment, and then added in a complicated tone:

"Not every child born in the House of Night inherits the lineage, either. And with how often Awakened die, our bloodline has always been at risk of vanishing… there are fewer of us now than ever before, and no one has been able to manifest the lineage as strongly as Nightwalker himself, yet. So… that was one of the reasons why he wanted to return to the Eternal City."

He looked around the spacious cabin they had gathered in, then gestured to its walls.

"The Night Garden is another. It is no secret to those who know it well that the Night Garden is in a state of disrepair. Some of its functions have deteriorated, while some have broken down entirely. It had been drifting in the Stormsea for thousands of years before being discovered by Nightwalker, after all. He believed that this great ship had been built at the wharf of the Eternal City, and therefore, that it could be repaired there, too."

Sunny frowned slightly.

He knew that the Night Garden had been built by the Demon of Repose. Did the Eternal City have a connection to her as well, then?

It was quite possible that it did. A city where living things were reborn anew every time their bodies and souls grew decrepit with age, and were therefore unfamiliar with death, sounded very much like something that the daemon wielding powers of restoration and rejuvenation could have created.

'What the…'

Had the Demon of Repose not only sailed the seas on a luxurious ship, but also operated an exclusive resort?

Sunny smelled a kindred spirit...

Naeve sighed.

"And lastly, Nightwalker only explored the outer fringes of the Eternal City before making his escape. The mystery of what was hidden in its depths — what treasures the immortals had left behind — had always drawn him back. So, he always intended to return there one day."

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"So why didn't he? He had the map."

Bloodwave spoke instead of Naeve, his deep voice betraying a hint of unease:

"Because he only escaped those waters by miracle, the first time around. People tend to think of the Stormsea as just another region of the Dream Realm, but actually, it is as vast as the rest of the explored area of this cursed world, encompassing waters that are as different from each other as Godgrave is different from the lawn in front of Bastion."

He smiled darkly.

"We humans are able to exist in some parts of the Stormsea, but that does not mean that we can sail it freely and go wherever we want. In fact, those who are not careful to stay in relatively safe waters all die terrible deaths. And among those who do steer clear of the more dangerous parts of the Stormsea, only some die."

Naeve nodded.

"The Eternal City is hidden in the very heart of the Stormsea, so even with a map, reaching it is a perilous task — at least it was, in the times when Nightwalker lived. You must remember that the most powerful of his contemporaries were only Masters, back then. Still… he never abandoned the plan of returning to the Eternal City, one day."

Sunny and Jet glanced at each other.

"Was that where he vanished? Did he leave on a voyage to the Eternal City and never come back?"

Naeve remained silent for a while.

"Yes. Some say that he died while exploring the Dream Realm, some say that he perished while attempting to conquer the Third Nightmare, but the truth is that Nightwalker left on a voyage to return to where he had first entered the Dream Realm. No one has heard anything about him since."

Sunny frowned.

Naeve believed that Nightwalker had vanished without a trace while attempting to reach the Eternal City, and that no one knew what had happened to him… but that was not entirely true.

Mordret knew something, it seemed. At least he let slip that Asterion had forcefully taken the lineage of Storm God from Nightwalker, which led Sunny to believe that the Dreamspawn had something to do with the disappearance of the founder of the House of Night — even if the details of their confrontation, as well as its timing, were murky.

In any case, Naeve had given him a lot to think about.

After a long bout of silence, Sunny asked in a reserved tone:

"So what you're saying is that there is a wondrous city — no doubt the most hideous hell imaginable, by now — lost somewhere in the Stormsea, full of mystical treasures and divine light. Not only does it hold the key to restoring the bloodline of Storm God, but there's also a wharf there where the Night Garden can be returned to its true glory. And the map to that city has just become visible to everyone in the Stormsea just now."

Naeve nodded cautiously.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then looked at Jet.

He stared at her for a moment.

"So… we are going there, right?"

She did not seem to share his enthusiasm, though.

"Sunny, are you asking me if I am willing to take my ship, complete with millions of people living aboard it, on an expedition to who knows where, knowing full well that there will definitely be untold horrors waiting for us along the way?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"...Yes?"

Jet shook her head slowly.

"Why would we take that risk?"

Hearing that, Aether nodded.

"I agree. It is too dangerous, even if the rewards promised by that expedition are great."

Naeve and Bloodwave remained silent, but they seemed to share his opinions at least to some degree.

Sunny looked at them with dark amusement.

"Why?"

He shook his head with a wry smile.

"Well, it's simple, really. Actually, I am quite surprised that I — a Sovereign — have to spell it out for you."

Leaning forward, he looked at Jet and the Saints of Night with no hint of humor in his eyes.

"It is because I am desperate. Nephis does not show it, but she is desperate, too. You don't seem to be nearly desperate enough, though, despite being weaker than us while knowing that the world is ending. There is barely any time left before all kinds of Cursed and Unholy beings descend upon us and consume us all. But you want to pass on a chance to increase the collective strength of humanity, and by a large margin at that?"

He leaned back and took a deep breath.

"Allow me to dispel your illusion, then. Being cautious is great, but caution is a luxury we cannot afford. The time for caution is long gone… it had been squandered entirely before any of us were even born. Our only inheritance is necessity, and necessity dictates that we must take risks, whether we like it or not."

Jet stared at him for a long while, her icy blue eyes betraying no emotion.

Eventually, she sighed.

"Is that the mindset of a Sovereign?"

Sunny smiled.

"Being desperate? Oh, it is. No one becomes Supreme by living a good life. Believe me… I am the most honest person in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

Chapter-2605: Risk and Reward

Sunny meant what he had said to Jet and the Saints of Night. Their situation was indeed desperate — the end of days was swiftly approaching, and the fate of humanity was woefully undecided. Perhaps others could ignore that ominous truth, but as one of the Supremes, Sunny was personally responsible for what would happen to the world in the end.

So, unlike those who wielded less power, he could not allow himself the solace of wilful ignorance.

'Things would have been easier if I could...'

He missed the time when all he worried about was making enough credits to fill his belly and live a lavish life. Well... that, and surviving another day in a world where everything seemed both unfathomably powerful and hellbent on killing him, somehow.

In any case, Sunny could not allow himself excessive caution.

That said, he was not suggesting that they had no room for caution at all. He had merely pointed out that their choices were limited and that erring on the side of caution when calculating risk and reward was a luxury they could not afford.

Sunny was not advocating for complete recklessness, though. He had valid reasons to believe that an expedition to the Eternal City would be successful… or, at the very least, not end in disaster.

There were several factors mitigating the risk of following the Star Map.

First and foremost, there was the Night Garden itself. The living ship had spent thousands of years drifting in the Stormsea, and nothing had managed to sink it yet — so, Sunny believed that it could

weather any danger they would face on the voyage to the Eternal City.

Even if they did stumble onto something too dreadful, though, there was one thing that the Night Garden was better at than almost any other Citadel — it was escaping danger.

Not only was the titanic ship highly mobile in and of itself, but there was also the ability to open the Dream Gate between two points in the Dream Realm that it granted Nephis. Should the need arise, the Night Garden would be able to retreat to safer waters almost in an instant — that way, the safety of its passengers could be ensured.

Sunny did not want to risk millions of lives, after all. He would not have suggested taking the Night Garden into perilous waters if he was not reasonably certain that they would have a reliable way to protect its passengers.

And lastly, there was the fact that Nightwalker had escaped the Eternal City once. Not only that, but he had managed to escape it as a Sleeper… now, an army of seasoned Awakened warriors would be heading there, led by three Saints of the House of Night and Soul Reaper Jet herself. Most importantly of all, there was Sunny.

And Sunny alone was the equivalent of having seven Sovereigns, a cohort of Supreme Shadows, and a vast army of undying shades guarding the Night Garden on its journey.

If that was not enough to reap the rewards of the Eternal City, then what was?

And those rewards promised to be bountiful, indeed — for Sunny, for the Night Garden, and for humanity at large. So, he judged that the risk presented by the expedition to the Eternal City was more than worth it.

Of course, Sunny was not going to make that decision unilaterally. In truth, he did not really need the Night Garden to follow the map left behind by Weaver — he just needed someone capable of reading it to accompany him. It was just that the Eternal City offered an opportunity to strengthen the living ship, as well. If not for that,

Sunny would have preferred to venture into the misty waters alone.

Regardless, Jet and Sunny needed to consult Nephis and Cassie before deciding whether to take the Night Garden into the depths of the Stormsea. Preparations for a lengthy voyage also had to be made, so a few days passed in discussions and strategic meetings.

Nephis was busy beyond belief, too. Cassie and she were still dealing with the fallout from Mordret's unexpected rise to the throne of Supremacy. There was the public reaction to deal with, but also the King of Nothing himself — he and his countless vessels had to be allowed passage to the Hollow Mountains, and someone had to make sure that things did not go awry in the process.

So, after many years, Mordret had returned to the Chained Isles.

There, the members of the White Feather clan escorted him and Nephis to the northern edges of the region, where the Night Temple had once stood. A new crossing was built to breach the wide divide between the floating islands and the misty slopes of the Hollow Mountains, which Mordret then used to leave the territory of the Human Domain behind and claim ownership of his own.

At the same time, the Eastern Quadrant had to be salvaged now that the Skinwalker was gone. Troops had to be transported to other flashpoints, and on top of that, powerful Nightmare Creatures stirred in the Death Zones south of Godgrave. So, Nephis and the Fire Keepers were in the process of preparing for a military expedition, as well.

In the end, it was decided that the expedition to the Eternal City had to happen.

While the preparations were being made, Sunny pulled the Shadow Legion back from the depths of the Burned Forest. He wanted to consolidate his position on its southern outskirts and secure his new Citadel in case of a potential attack — but more than that, he wanted his army to be free and ready to be deployed on the shores of the Eternal City, if need be.

The same went for his other incarnations. After experiencing two

deadly adventures while not having access to his full power, Sunny was dead set on meeting the dangers of the Eternal City armed to the teeth.

About a week after the initial meeting with the Saints of Night, the same people gathered in the private council cabin of the Mainmast Pagoda once again. This time, they had more practical issues to discuss.

'How bad will this particular adventure turn out, I wonder...'

Chapter-2606: Dreadful Beings

"We are self-sufficient in many areas, but food production still lags behind the consumption rate — despite the special influence of the Night Garden on soil and flora. So, the latest shipment of provisions was increased to account for unexpected delays during the journey… not that we know for sure how long sailing to the Eternal City will take."

"What about those special seeds from Ravenheart? I thought we were supposed to receive one of the first batches."

"Those are not ready to be planted yet. Apparently, the latest strains are too aggressive… whatever that means."

"Well, if Bliss says so. I assume we also stocked up on medical supplies, household items, and so on?"

"Yes. But what about the consequences of your absence, Jet? Won't it have a negative effect on the situation in the Northern and Western Quadrants?"

"The old man is still alive and kicking. Effie and Kai can pick up the slack, as well. In any case, we received some breathing room because of what had happened in Australia, so I might as well take a vacation. Gods know I need a break."

"Jet! Break!"

Sunny smiled faintly, listening to their conversation.

At that moment, Aether, who had remained similarly quiet, spoke up from his seat:

"I think we are overlooking an important issue."

The rest of them looked at him, somewhat surprised. Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What issue is that?"

Aether considered his words for a few moments, then gestured to the night sky visible through the open window.

"The stars. The journey to the Eternal City was perilous because of where it is located, but only those who possessed a map knew where to go. Now, however, the stars charting a path to the Eternal City are visible to anyone who can look up at the sky. And any thing."

Sunny frowned slightly.

"Are you suggesting… what I think you are suggesting?"

The youngest of the Saints of Night nodded.

"Yes, Lord Shadow. We are willing to risk the dangers of the Stormsea because of the treasures hidden in the Eternal City, as well as the great secrets that mystical place holds. But will we be the only ones lured by its promise? I don't think so."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"So we'll have competition?"

Aether shrugged.

"That is what I would assume. After all, why would powerful Nightmare Creatures not want to get their claws on a city that was once populated by immortals? All the things that we want to find there are the things they would want to consume, desecrate, or make their own."

Leaning forward a little, the young Saint said in a quiet voice:

"You showed us a way to the Eternal City when you ignited the stars, Lord Shadow. But I am afraid that you also started a race among those who can interpret the celestial map… and the participants of that race would not hesitate to rip each other to shreds to make sure

that they get to the prize first. So, this expedition is going to be even more dangerous than it was supposed to be, since we will have to contend against dreadful beings making the same journey."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then leaned back with a somber expression.

Eventually, he sighed.

"Ah, but you are forgetting something, Saint Aether."

A pale smile split his face apart.

"I am a dreadful being myself... I just have better manners."

Sunny was not boasting, simply stating a fact. If he considered his powers separately from his personality, they painted the picture of quite an eldritch horror. Nephis was largely the same, if not more frightening.

'Wait, come to think of it…'

Sunny's personality was not that great, either.

He remained silent for a few moments, staring into the distance with a strange expression.

'Anyway... moving on...'

In any case, Sunny was not too worried.

Which was not to say that he was not taking Aether's theory seriously.

Looking around, he lingered a little, then asked in a neutral tone:

"Does the Night Garden carry some kind of armaments? Like cannons or enchanted siege engines?"

Jet smiled lazily.

"The ship itself is a living armament… but no, it does not. In theory, we are its armaments — Naeve, Aether, Bloodwave, and I. As well as

Awakened and Ascended warriors stationed aboard."

Sunny hummed in contemplation.

'So, it is more of a carrier than a battleship…'

It made sense. A Saint was far more capable and could deliver far more damage than any siege engine ever could, enchanted or not. So, if there was something that the hull of the living ship could not handle itself, its Transcendent passengers were there to solve the problem.

With a Supreme aboard, the firepower that the passengers of the Night Garden could unleash would increase tenfold. The problem was that Sunny could not reveal himself openly.

He considered his options for a short while, then shook his head.

"That is good and all, but having a few powerful cannons never hurts. You were in Falcon Scott, weren't you? I hear the railguns on its walls were quite something."

Jet's relaxed smile turned a few hues darker.

"Yes, I was. And yes, mundane armaments were of great help… not that it mattered, in the end."

The Saints of Night had guided plenty of naval convoys in the waking world, so they were well-acquainted with the benefits of having powerful armaments, as well. Naeve gave Sunny a confused look.

"Where would we find enchanted siege engines, though? Ones worthy of the Night Garden, no less. I don't think those are just laying around, unused."

Sunny shrugged with a smile.

"There's no need to search for them. I'll just forge them."

He was currently developing vast defensive spells to reinforce the Citadels of humanity, aided by Cassie. Arming the Night Garden was not entirely the same, but it would serve the same purpose.

Plus… the idea of making a huge, devastating magical cannon made Sunny excited.

His smile widened.

"Yeah. Let me scrounge something up…"

Chapter-2607: Naval Engagement

Several weeks later, the battered Night Garden flew across the waves as the sea foamed and boiled around it.

Space was unpredictable in the Stormsea, and time was unpredictable as well — day was sometimes so short that it could be missed in the blink of an eye, while night often overstated its welcome. Most of the time, however, the vast expanse of undulating water was shrouded in twilight, with pale stars shimmering in the distant sky.

At the moment, though, the Stormsea was bathed in sunlight, with not a cloud in sight. There was no wind, no storm was coming to unleash its fury on the Night Garden… despite that, the sea was turbulent and eerie, the water foaming as it seethed and roiled all around the living ship, as far as the eye could see.

There were terrifying scars marring the hull of the Night Garden, slow to heal despite the ancient vessel's startling ability to mend itself. The civilians were safely sheltered below the main deck and remained in the sprawling vertical city hidden there while martial law was in effect, so only Awakened soldiers and Ascended officers were in sight.

That had become the norm over the last few weeks, as the Night Garden had engaged in countless battles and clashes with the Nightmare Creatures rushing to reach the Eternal City. All of Stormsea seemed to have gone mad once the celestial map was revealed — but now that they were getting closer to the goal, only the most dreadful contenders remained in the race.

"Captain! It's… it's surfacing!"

In the runic hall of the main pagoda, Jet gave one of her subordinates

an amused look.

"Captain, huh? If memory serves, I was a Lieutenant General last time somebody bothered to formally promote me. Shouldn't you fools call me an Admiral, at least?"

The man blushed, embarrassed by her calm tone.

"S—sorry, uh… m'am? But that thing, i—it's…"

He did not get to finish the sentence, though, because at that moment, the foaming sea seemed to move.

At first, it seemed as if two towering waves swelled on both sides of the ship. Then, however, the water continued to rise, as if the sea was pregnant with two towering mountains — a few heartbeats later, the surface tension broke, and two gargantuan tentacles burst from the depths into the vast expanse of the sky.

Each was at least half a dozen kilometers long… and that was only what was visible of them above the surface. Who knew how deep they stretched into the abyssal depths of the bottomless sea?

And who would want to know what was hidden there, in the depths?

The colossal tentacles rose from the sea like two black cliffs, casting their shadows on the Night Garden…

"Port and starboard, fire!"

Jet did not raise her voice, but somehow, it could be clearly heard despite the roaring of water and the howling of the wind.

A signal was given, and a few moments later, the cannons stationed along the sides of the titanic ship thundered.

There were twenty-four of these cannons in total — twelve per side — and each of them was a massive beast. The cannons were twelve meters in length and more than two meters in diameter, firing iron balls that were almost as tall as a person and weighed so much that only Ascended could load them into the barrels.

The cannons were not cast from metal, but rather carved from seemingly indestructible black stone, their surface engraved with intricate carvings. When Jet asked where that material came from, Sunny simply said that he borrowed some obsidian from the Shadow Realm… she was still not sure whether he was joking or not.

And when she asked what function the engravings served, he gave her a strange look and told her that they were there to make the cannons look pretty.

That, he seemed to have been deadly serious about.

'That man…'

In any case, the cannons were enchanted with simple, but ingenious magic. They were able to absorb soul essence and then convert it into kinetic energy to propel the cannonballs with devastating force. The projectiles themselves were charged with essence, as well — that way, they were able to wound even Nightmare Creatures of high Ranks.

Of course, while only the quantity of essence mattered when charging the cannons — which meant that they could be operated by crews of Awakened — it was the quality of essence that mattered when infusing the cannonballs. So, if the Night Garden faced abominations of the Corrupted Rank or higher, a Master had to be in charge of the artillery crew to make the shots count.

Or better yet, a Saint…

Sadly, the Transcendent defenders of the Night Garden had better things to do than run around fueling cannons with their essence, and the abominations they faced on this particular expedition were often of the Great Rank, instead.

However, the Lord of Shadows had thought of a solution for that, as well.

To solve the problem, he designed the cannons in a way that allowed them to consume essence not only from Awakened, but also from soul shards. And, luckily enough, he seemed to possess literal thousands of

Transcendent soul shards, at the moment — the spoils from the conquest of the Burden Forest, no doubt.

These soul shards had been distributed among the government soldiers aboard the Night Garden, resulting in a significant increase in their overall powe. These days, there was hardly any Awakened or Ascended here without a fully saturated core. The remaining shards were assigned to the cannon crews, and were being used to feed powerful essence into the cannonballs.

…As the cannons thundered, massive orbs of shining metal streaked through the air and tore into the colossal tentacles. Enormous chunks of flesh and torrents of oily black liquid filled the air, and one of the tentacles folded under its own weight, falling back into the waves.

The aim of the starboard cannoneers fell short of the mark, though, and the second tentacle continued to rise above the Night Garden.

When its massive shadow fell upon the living ship, Jet looked up with a somber expression.

"Brace."

As the enormous tentacle fell, wrapping itself around the Night Garden, four more rose from the foaming sea.

Chapter-2608: Three Serpents and a Whale

The Night Garden trembled as the colossal tentacle fell from the sky, wrapping itself around it.

The invisible shield protecting the deck of the living ship from the fury of storms prevented it from wreaking havoc across the superstructures, and it avoided skewering itself on the tall masts, as well — however, the vessel still ended up captured in a horrid embrace, the hull groaning as unimaginable pressure descended upon it.

The tentacle constricted, trying to crush the Night Garden into splinters and pull it under the waves.

Jet did not seem too concerned, however.

Looking at the southern horizon, where a strange haze was gathering above the sea, she frowned slightly.

"Reload the cannons. Divination team, I need a weather forecast as soon as possible."

The Chain of Nightmares had been a disaster to Awakened wielding powers of divination, who became far less capable in its wake. However, they still had their uses, and some seemed to have been affected less than others.

"Nightfall is imminent!"

Jet's frown deepened a little.

"How imminent?"

Her question was met with silence.

...But even those who were affected less were far from precise.

The sea boiled as four gargantuan tentacles rose from it, and the hull of the Night Garden groaned as the fifth one constricted around it.

Jet pursed her lips.

'Ah… I think I am starting to hate water, too.'

At that moment, two human figures plummeted from the great height of the living ship's main deck, flying toward the water. The fall would have undoubtedly killed anyone below the Transcendent Rank on impact, but these two simply dove into the waves.

A heartbeat later, two massive shadows moved under the water, rushing toward the gargantuan tentacles — they were Naeve and Bloodwave, the Saints of the fallen House of Night, who had assumed their Transcendent forms.

Jet glanced at her shadow. She was sure that a subtle presence was hiding in it before, but now, the shadow felt empty.

The Sovereign of Death seemed to have departed to join the battle, as well. There, below the waves, he could unleash his power without being seen… so, Jet shuddered to imagine the horror of what would happen in the depths before too long.

She looked south.

There, far away… the mist was gathering.

Far below the Night Garden, in the murky depths, Sunny was hidden in Naeve's shadow. The water was boiling around them, and the colossal shapes of the black tentacles rose from the vast darkness below like long stalks of some abyssal flower, twisting and swaying as they stretched toward the surface.

Bloodwave had assumed the shape of a monstrous killer whale, his giant body moving through the water with chilling ferocity. The enormous blue eyes of the great predator suddenly ignited with an

ominous red glow — in the next moment, the sea around them was painted in hues of crimson, and the frightening presence of the oldest surviving Saint of Night became even more daunting.

As much as the Transcendent form of Bloodwave was enormous, however, Naeve almost dwarfed him. Having turned into a colossal sea serpent, he rushed toward a different tentacle with astonishing, terrifying speed. It was not just that the serpent was fast — rather, water itself parted to let him pass and flowed in the direction he chose, supporting his feral charge.

Due to his Transcendent form and the nature of his Aspect, Neave reminded Sunny of the Serpent King sometimes. There were a lot of similarities between their Transformations, but there were subtle differences as well. Sunny had not noticed it before, but now that he had observed Naeve closer, he realized that the beautiful scales of his Transcendent form… were actually formed from glacial ice.

In fact, he suspected that Neave's entire Transcendent form was made not from flesh, but from various shapes of altered and finely controlled water. So, in a sense, the beautiful sea serpent was not a ferocious beast — instead, it was a hydraulic death machine in the form of a mystical aquatic monster.

It did not make Naeve any less fearsome, though.

Just as his maw opened, glistening with a palisade of razor-sharp icy fangs…

Sunny judged that they were deep enough for his arrival to remain unnoticed.

He allowed himself to slide off Naeve's azure scales and then summoned a torrent of shadows from the Shadow Lantern.

In the next moment, a gargantuan serpent forged from onyx and darkness roared under the vast mass of restless water, making the sea ripple and boil. His tenebrous form far surpassed that of both Naeve and Bloodwave in size, casting a shadow so deep that it felt darker than the lightless expanse of the abyssal depths.

And in that shadow, another titanic shape stirred.

As Sunny tore through the mass of water in the Shell of the Onyx Serpent, Soul Serpent separated from him and rushed the other way, moving with chilling grace in the crimson darkness of the Stormsea.

'Snakes everywhere…'

Sunny felt a hint of vicious glee as he, Serpent, Naeve, and Bloodwave each tore into one of the gargantuan tentacles. The harrowing violence of it all was simply beyond comprehension: the water boiled, rivers of oily black blood spilled into its depths, grotesque pieces of shredded flesh slowly sank into the darkness, and destructive shockwaves rolled through the water, causing towering waves somewhere far above.

Well, of course the violence was dreadful. There were two Transcendent descendants of Storm God and two Supreme Titans assaulting the unknown horror of the depths, after all — it was difficult to imagine a calamity on a larger scale than that.

The twisting tentacles were too gargantuan and tough to be torn apart, though. Even Sunny, with the prodigious size of his Shell, could not bite one in two — far from it. So, instead, he tore into his target, shredding it and ripping huge chunks of flesh out.

As black blood clouded the water around him, slowly melting the impregnable barrier of the Jade Mantle, he felt the tentacle weaken.

The goal was to deal enough damage to make it collapse under its own weight. If enough muscle tissue was torn and shredded, the horror of the depths would not be able to control the tentacle anymore, and would therefore be forced to pull it back into the abyssal depths.

The problem with that, however, was that it wasn't easy to continuously attack the same spot on the swaying, twisting tentacle — and if they were not careful, they would be caught and crushed by the thing they were meant to hurt.

Sunny, Serpent, and the Saints of Night were managing fine, though.

After all, it was not the first time the Night Garden was attacked by this particular horror — they had battled it several times before, and each time, they managed to drive it back.

The soldiers aboard the living ship had even given the terrifying depth dweller a nickname, calling it Old Tom.

Sunny was not sure about the naming sense — personally, he could have undoubtedly come up with something far superior — but it did not really matter what the terrifying dweller of the depths was called.

Today, Sunny wanted to accomplish something more than simply repelling Old Tom back into the depths from which it had come from.

As each of the four shredded tentacles retreated into the dark depths, he let out a low growl…

And then followed them down into the abyss.

Naeve, Bloodwave, and Serpent did, as well.

Soon, all light disappeared from the vast expanse of cold water around them, and they found themselves in utter darkness.

Chapter-2609: Deadly Race

Back on the surface, the four tentacles plummeted into the water and disappeared from view. The fifth, meanwhile, was still straining to crush the Night Garden in its terrible embrace.

The living ship refused to shatter, though.

Instead, at the points where the colossal tentacle was wrapped around its hull, Old Tom's flesh seemed to boil, and torrents of oily blood flowed down the surface of the weathered wood, painting it black.

But soon enough, the coating of black blood was absorbed into the Night Garden, as well, and it regained its original color.

The titanic struggle continued for some time, and then, the dark tentacle shuddered. It tried to extricate itself from the living ship, but the hull of the Night Garden would not let it go.

In an eerie change of pace, the previous situation seemed to have been reversed — instead of trying to crush the ancient vessel, the gargantuan tentacle was now straining in an attempt to escape.

Slowly, the revolting flesh of the mysterious horror ripped, and finally, the tentacle tore itself free of the wooden hull — not without leaving enormous chunks of flesh behind, though.

With all its underside skinned and stripped of a layer of flesh, the tentacle whipped into the air, raining black blood upon the sea. Convulsing, it then retreated into the surging waves and disappeared from view.

A new scar was added to the hull of the Night Garden, with pieces of the colossal tentacle slowly sinking into the surface of the living wood. The ancient vessel was going to consume Old Tom's flesh like

it had that of countless abominations before, and use these nutrients to mend whatever damage the horror of the depths dealt it.

Granted... the previous scars left on the hull of the Night Garden by Old Tom were slow to heal, still marring its surface.

Another tentacle was already rising from the foaming water, but despite that, Jet let out a relieved sigh.

Old Tom was one of the most persistent contenders in the race to the Eternal City — many of the abominations they had clashed with during this perilous voyage had already perished, either slain by humans or torn apart by fellow Nightmare Creatures, but this terrifying creature continued to follow the Night Garden like a curse, attacking it from the depths from time to time.

Hopefully, the Lord of Shadows and the Saints of Night would destroy it today — or, if not, then at least gather information about what Old Tom actually was. No one had seen the source of the terrifying tentacles, since it was hidden too deep.

The horror of the depths was not what Jet was worried about, though.

"The mist is coming!"

Cursing quietly, she looked south.

There, the eerie haze had already turned into a rolling wall of ghostly mist. Cold winds suddenly assaulted the Night Garden, and the wall of mist moved across the surface of the water, slowly devouring the world.

Jet studied it with a tense expression, and so did everyone else in the runic hall.

Far below, on the main deck, the soldiers charging the cannons stopped, as well, watching the approaching mist with pale faces.

'Will it come?'

As if to answer Jet's question, a massive shadow moved in the mist.

A dead silence enveloped the Night Garden as everyone looked south with wary expressions.

Then, the silhouette of an eerie ship slowly revealed itself in the fog. Although not quite as titanic as the Night Garden, it was still enormous, towering above the sea like a fortress built of rotten wood. Its tattered sails swayed slowly in the ghostly winds, and an eerie glow emanated from its broken, deserted deck.

The ship looked almost translucent, as if it was there and not there at the same time. It moved at the edge of the rolling wall of mist, looking like it was guiding it…

"Dutchman. It's the Dutchman!"

Just then, the ghostly shapes of smaller vessels revealed themselves from the veil of fog, being drawn by the same ethereal winds that carried the Dutchman — that was what the soldiers had named the flagship of the ghostly fleet.

Jet wasn't sure what an old tale from before the Dark Times had to do with abominable Nightmare Creatures of the Stormsea, but the nickname stuck.

"Diviners…"

"Nightfall within half an hour, m'am!"

Jet closed her eyes for a moment.

'Half an hour, huh?'

Half an hour… was a long, long time.

"Move the starboard cannons to port. Pull the Awakened soldiers below deck, send all Ascended officers to the battlements. Summon every Echo we have… Aether, the bridge is yours. You know what to do."

Aether gave her a guardedly worried look, then bowed slightly.

"Yes, Lady Jet."

Jet blinked a few times.

'...Right. I'm a lady now.'

Smiling crookedly, she raised her arms above her head and stretched like a cat, then let out a long sigh and summoned the Mist Blade.

Commanding it into the shape of a war scythe, Jet then took a step forward and turned into a torrent of mist herself.

Descending from the height of the Mainmast Pagoda, she rushed across the great span of the Night Garden's main deck and reached its edge.

There, the Awakened soldiers were already retreating hastily, while the Ascended cursed as they pushed the heavy cannons into place.

Flowing upward, Jet returned to her corporeal form on top of one of the great cannons, standing at the very edge of its long obsidian barrel.

The water foamed and surged far below her.

Placing the scythe on her shoulder, Jet looked south, at the eerie shape of the Dutchman.

A few moments later, she felt a chill run down her spine.

She knew that someone… or something… was looking back at her.

She raised a hand with a faint smile and beckoned the captain of the Dutchman with her finger, inviting him to come.

In the next moment, the sails of the ghostly flotilla swelled, and dozens of rotting ships tore free of the wall of mist, flying across the waves toward the Night Garden.

'Come, come... you bastards. I was hungry, anyway.'

Chapter-2610: Wraith Armada

Jet could have sensed the advance of the ghostly armada even with her eyes closed. That was because the moment the captain of the Dutchman commanded his spectral fleet to sail forth, the winds vanished, plunging the world into a dead calm.

All around the Night Garden, the water was restless because of the dreadful battle happening in the depths, but further away, it turned still and glasslike, reflecting the boundless sky like a vast mirror.

There was no wind, and yet, the wall of mist continued to roll forward fo from the south, slowly devouring the world. The sails of the ghostly ships were swelling, and the ethereal vessels flew forward across the still surface of the motionless sea.

The tentacles of the Old Tom rose from the water on one side of the Night Garden, while from the other, the wraith armada swiftly shortened the distance, ghostly fires igniting on the dimly glowing decks.

Jet grimaced.

'They just had to attack at the same time, damn it…'

But then again, maybe they did.

The race to the Eternal City was coming to an end, after all. They were no more than a day or two away from reaching the finish line — countless contenders had perished along the way, and only the strongest ones remained.

Old Tom, the Dutchman, and the Night Garden were among those. Today was their last chance to dispose of the competition, so it was no wonder that the horror of the depths and the nebulous wraith commanding the Dutchman chose to attack.

Honestly, if Jet had a reliable way of tracking either of these foes, she would have been tempted to hunt them down herself — she and the Lord of Shadows had already eradicated more than a few rival contenders that way, leaving the waters of the Stormsea red with blood.

"Fire!"

Aether's command was relayed to the cannon crews, and the Ascended activated the enchantments of the great siege weapons.

Jet took a step back and braced herself as the obsidian barrel beneath her shuddered and roared, sending an enormous ball of incandescent iron flying forward with dreadful speed.

The force unleashed by the sorcery of the Lord of Shadows was so terrible that the enormous cannon, weighing hundreds of tons, rolled a few meters back — it would have rolled further, too, if not for black chains that kept it in place.

Jet easily maintained her balance on top of itit, watching the radiant cannonball streak across the sky. The thunderous roar of twenty-four of these cannons firing in quick succession was both deafening and violent, but she endured the palpable sonic shock of it as well.

It was like music to her ears.

A powerful gale of wind sent her raven-black hair dancing, and her icy eyes glowed with a chilling blue light through the chaos of the devastating salvo.

A few moments later, the cannonballs struck the ethereal ship. Some missed their marks, plunging into the sea and sending towering plumes of foaming water into the air, but the rest had been aimed true.

A dark smile illuminated Jet's pale face.

At least a dozen of the ghostly vessels were severely damaged, a few of them even dissolving into halos of ghastly, ephemeral light — as if dispelled by the violent force of the sorcerous bombardment.

Sadly, the wraith armada was an insidious adversary. Both the ships and the bloodthirsty ghosts populating them were spectral in nature, so only those attacks that targeted the intangible could harm them. The destructive physical force carried by the radiant cannonballs was wasted on the ghastly fleet of restless souls.

However, the soul essence that the cannonballs had been charged with could still wreak havoc among the spectral ships, even if the damage was not as devastating as it could have been.

Several ships were dispelled, and several more slowed down, damaged by the bombardment.

"Reload the cannons!"

Jet evaluated the speed of the wraith armada and the remaining distance between the fastest ship and the Night Garden. The cannons were powerful, but it took time to saturate them with essence, not to mention the laborious process of loading new cannonballs into the enormous barrels.

There was no time for the second salvo…

The eerie shape of the Dutchman loomed in the mist behind the armada, towering above the advancing ships like a lumbering beast.

Drawing closer.

Jet did not even know if the vessels the bombardment dispelled were truly gone, or simply returned to their source and would be summoned again later. The Night Garden had seen the wraith armada from a distance a few times and clashed with it once, but back then, the Dutchman had not seemed inclined to commit its forces to a full-scale battle.

Perhaps its owner had been wary of the dead captain of the Night Garden and the ghostly monarch she was hosting aboard her ship, seeing a perverse kinship between them. Or, perhaps, he simply saw no reason to bother.

But now, the wraith armada was descending upon the living ship in full force.

"Want to board my ship, huh?"

Jet exhaled slowly, then changed the grip on her war scythe.

A moment later, she leaned forward and sent it flying with a throw as powerful as what the great cannon beneath her was capable of.

At the same time, she turned into a torrent of mist and wrapped herself around the ice-cold blade, riding it across the sky toward the advancing armada.

Her aim was true.

The war scythe bit into the spectral deck of the leading vessel, causing the glow of the entire ship to dim. Jet assumed her human form and stepped onto the rotten wood, placing her hand on the trembling shaft of the Mist Blade.

'How about I board yours, instead?'

All around her, ethereal figures rose from the ephemeral glow — the ghastly shapes of dead sailors still bound to their sunken ship, knowing no peace or solace.

Looking at them with a chilling hunger, Jet grinned.

The Dutchman commanded a fleet of restless souls…

And now, he had delivered them to Soul Reaper.

Chapter-2611: More Dreadful Wraith

The ghostly crewmates of the spectral ship all wielded power similar to that of Corrupted abominations. Most were akin to Beasts, while the captain was akin to a Monster — at least that had been the case during the brief skirmish between the vanguard of the wraith armada and the Night Garden in the past.

Jet could feel that this particular crew was more powerful than the scouts who had attempted to board the living ship before, and had no doubt that there were far more dreadful beings among the ghosts the Dutchman commanded — Demons, Devils, and even abominations of the Great Rank.

But it did not matter.

The ghastly armada was vast, and there seemed to be an endless number of lost souls populating the ethereal, rotting ships. They were wraiths, which meant that most Awakened would be in great peril in a battle against the Dutchman's otherworldly army. But for that very reason, Jet was their natural enemy.

Her Aspect allowed her to directly destroy the souls of her enemies, after all. Not only that, but she grew stronger with each enemy she killed. Her essence was replenished, and the cold shattered star of her soul core grew both in size and volume… one dark jagged shard at a time.

After two relentless decades of carnage and slaughter, her jigsaw soul core had become vast and expansive, looming above her Soul Sea like a broken sun.

And that, in turn, allowed her to augment her undying body with essence far past the limits of what any other Awakened was capable

of, both granting her fierce power and allowing her to sustain that ferocity for a longer time — almost indefinitely, as long as there were living beings for her to kill.

Or undead beings…

It mattered not to Jet.

As the crew of the spectral ship rose from ghostly light and rushed at her, she saw them clearly. Their ancient armor was shredded and torn, their phantasmal bodies underneath were covered in terrible wounds, and their cold empty eyes burned with ethereal green flames.

There was no frenzied hunger or demented fury in their gazes, though, line in those of most Nightmare Creatures… just torment.

Lunging forward to meet the tide of murderous wraiths, Jet spun her war scythe and easily sliced the nearest of specters in half. A mundane blade — or even an enchanted one — would have simply passed through his ephemeral body as if it were passing through mist, but her scythe severed the soul of the spectral abomination just as easily as it would have severed flesh.

The silhouette of the ancient wraith rippled and dissolved into a dying flash of pale light, disappearing forever.

Those who had managed to slay these strange beings before reported that the Nightmare Spell did not announce their deaths, and there were no soul shards left behind them either.

But Jet could clearly feel the end of the ghostly sailor's existence. A stream of essence entered her soul, and a new shard was added to the jagged orb of her broken soul core, making it a fraction bigger.

The Spell whispered into her ear, as well.

[You have slain a… you have slain a… you have…]

However, its voice suddenly faltered and grew indistinct, as if it could not process or express the truth of what had happened, like a machine encountering an error.

'How curious…'

It seemed that even the Nightmare Spell did not quite know what the Dutchman and his wraith armada were, or at least could not speak it.

Jet ignored that information, for now.

Continuing the motion, she took a step forward while reversing the grip on her weapon and thrust it forward to pierce the chest of the next wraith. Since their ethereal bodies offered the Mist Blade no resistance, she then fluidly transitioned from a downward thrust into a spin, beheading the one rushing at her from the back.

[You have slain... a...]

Jet exploded into a hurricane of ice-cold steel, moving across the deck of the ghostly ship like the Grim Reaper. She was a Transcendent being, while the spectral sailors were all Corrupted — so, in theory, each of them wielded power equal to hers, or at least power that existed in the same realm. Nevertheless, they all fell under her scythe like stalks of wheat, vanishing forever.

And whatever essence she burned while harvesting these lost souls was immediately replenished by the streams of essence she received from the kills.

The captain of the ship was far more powerful than his subordinates, but he dissolved into ghostly green light in mere moments, as well. In an astonishingly short amount of time, the deck of the rotting ship became empty, with only Jet standing there, bathed in an eerie glow and the echoes of the brutal violence that had just been perpetrated here.

Still… she felt like her job here was not finished, yet.

So, Jet plunged the blade of her scythe into the deck itself, aiming to destroy the soul of the ship.

That, she felt, was the real monster.

It took several blows, and just as she suspected, a torrent of essence more potent than all the previous ones flowed into her soul as the

shape of the ship dimmed, slowly disappearing into the bright daylight. At the same time, an explosion of radiance escaped from somewhere deep within its hold, accompanied by a litany of otherworldly groans.

As if a swarm of tortured souls was suddenly set free.

Jet smiled darkly, thinking that she was starting to unravel the secret nature of the sinister wraith armada — or at least the nature of its lesser ships.

…Just before the spectral ship disappeared completely, she pushed herself off its broken deck and soared high into the air, flying across the sky.

Breaching hundreds of meters with that single jump, Jet landed on the next ship in a maelstrom of cold steel, wreaking havoc among its crew and harvesting their souls to empower her own.

Behind her, the Night Garden towered like a fortress of weathered wood, and her soldiers were feverishly rushing to reload its mighty cannons.

Chapter-2612: Horror of the Abyss

While Jet butchered the specters aboard the leading ships of the wraith armada and the towering walls of mist slowly approached the Night Garden, another gargantuan tentacle descended on the living ship, aiming to swipe the Ascended cannoneers off its deck and destroy the mighty armaments.

The invisible aegis protecting them held, but it seemed to be straining in the crushing grasp of Old Tom.

Just then, a black arrow fell from the secluded garden on the roof of the Mainmast Pagoda, followed by an enormous javelin that seemed to be forged from pure darkness. The violence of their impact was so horrific that the gargantuan tentacle was torn open and maimed, releasing its hold on the Night Garden in a flood of oily blood.

That was Slayer and Saint entering the battle from the privacy of Soul Reaper's garden.

Sunny had not left the Great Citadel unguarded before diving into the dark depths, of course.

And there, in those dark depths…

Sunny, Serpent, Naeve, and Bloodwave continued to descend into the crushing cold abyss as they pursued the wounded tentacles of the ancient horror. No light penetrated the mass of water far enough to illuminate their surroundings, so they found themselves in utter, absolute darkness.

Of course, Sunny could sense the movement of shadows and pierce the veil of darkness with his gaze. The Saints of Night, meanwhile, navigated the lightless abyss with their own powers — if anything,

they were more at home in the depths than he was.

Still, Sunny was certain that even the descendants of the House of Night didn't dive that deep often.

The wounded tentacles retreated downward with stunning speed, leaving billowing trails of oily blood in their wake. As he pursued them, the water grew colder and colder — much more palpable, however, was the mounting pressure of its great mass.

They had long passed the point where mundane humans, or even machines they created, would have been crushed by the pressure of the dark abyss. Then, they passed the point where Awakened would have been killed, as well.

By the time they reached the point where Ascended could have survived, either, even Sunny could feel the terrible pressure constricting his movements. The intricately shaped plates of the Jade Mantle groaned as they scraped against each other, and the Onyx Serpent Shell was sustaining minor, but continuous damage, forcing him to mend it as they continued the descent.

The water had turned eerie here, acting in strange ways. And yet, the tentacles continued to flee into the darkness, and Sunny still could not sense their source.

'Just… how deep does that horror dwell?'

The irreverent nickname made one forget what Old Tom truly was, at times… as well as the fact that nobody truly knew the shape and nature of that eldritch horror. All they had ever seen of it were the gargantuan tentacles that reached toward the surface from far below.

And now…

Sunny finally sensed something.

It was not the body of Old Tom, though.

Instead of it, a swarm of gargantuan tentacles suddenly shot from the dark abyss, rising toward them like a harrowing forest of slithering, colossal vines.

Sunny was taken aback for a short moment.

During the previous attacks, the dreadful dweller of the depths had never attacked the Night Garden with more than seven of its long limbs. Now, however, there were dozens of them reaching toward Sunny and his companions, each comparable in size to the gargantuan tentacles that could wrap themselves around the titanic vastness of the Night Garden.

It was as if the abyss itself had come alive to destroy them.

'Now… where the hell has good old Tom been hiding all these?'

Sunny shook off his bewilderment and pushed his enormous body forward to meet the dark forest of gargantuan tentacles.

It seemed that they had underestimated Old Tom… a tad.

There was no time to regret this failure of imagination, though, because soon, the tentacles were upon them. Sunny was the vanguard of their group, and the most powerful among them as well — so, it was his duty to break the momentum of the harrowing tide of dark flesh.

Just before the tentacles reached him, he gritted his teeth and released the defensive barrier of the Onyx Serpent Shell, allowing it to dissolve into the darkness. He released the constraints giving his own shadow a human shape, as well, and let it spread to its true, unfathomable vastness.

In the next moment, Sunny turned into a vast cloud of formless darkness.

And from that darkness, dozens of long tendrils stretched forward, clashing with those of Old Tom. Of course, Sunny was not quite as gargantuan as the horror of the depths… but his Will was infused with the essence of death, so his touch was for mode deadly.

The monstrous clash tore apart the abyss, forcing the mass of water crushed by the unbearable pressure to flow like a current.

Somewhere far above, monstrous waves rose, scattering the ghostly

armada and making the Night Garden sway.

Serpent, Naeve, and Bloodwave swam through the carnage of intertwined tentacles and tendrils of darkness, sinking their fangs into Old Tom's flesh.

The dreadful chaos of the deepwater battle continued unabated, and at some point, seething from murderous rage and pain permeating his wounded shadow, Sunny realized that the sea around them was changing.

It seemed that Old Tom was pushing them toward the surface.

At the same time, he sensed that the number of tentacles the dreadful depth dweller unleashed upon them was gradually reducing, as if not all of them were long enough to reach that far up.

'...It's trying to retreat.'

Old Tom might not have been wary of Sunny and the Night Garden, but it seemed reluctant to let them close to its hidden body. So, it wanted to retreat back into the depths.

They had dealt it enough damage to make the horror of the depths take them seriously, at least.

...Or maybe it simply judged that the Night Garden itself had sustained enough damage to stall its arrival in the Eternal City.

The question was… would Sunny let the eerie horror escape once more?

'Damn it all!'

Sunny forced himself to coalesce back into a human shadow and covered it by the fearsome carapace of the Jade Mantle, using the [Feather of Truth] to make it just buoyant enough to stay in place.

Casting a dark gaze at the battered tentacles of Old Tom, he gritted his teeth.

The sea had turned black from the blood of the horrid creature of the

depths.

But he wasn't unscathed, either.

There was a decision to be made…

Chapter-2613: Two Captains

Far above, the Night Garden swayed as colossal waves crashed into its hull. The wraith armada was scattered, but remained unscathed, continuing its swift advance as the towering wall of mist devoured the world behind it.

The forward ships of the ghostly fleet were gone, though, their spectral crews eviscerated by the ruthless blade of the Reaper. Jet had sustained some wounds, but the chilling slaughter she had perpetrated effortlessly overshadowed their severity.

And, unlike how any other Awakened would, she was not growing tired. If anything, the more enemies she slayed, the more alive she looked, as if the dark splendor of the unending slaughter filled her with vitality.

There were two problems, though.

The first one was that the deeper into the wraith armada she went, the more powerful her enemies became. The last captain he had killed was definitely strong enough to have been a Great abomination, and the ship itself refused to be destroyed in just a few strikes. In the end, she had nearly taken it apart with her scythe before the spectral vessel finally succumbed.

The closer a spectral vessel was to the Dutchman in the formation of the ghostly fleet, the more sinister it seemed to be. On top of that, deeper into the armada, the ships had not been damaged by the initial bombardment of the Night Garden's mighty cannons, so their crews were entirely unscathed when she attacked them.

The bigger problem, however, was that Jet was just one woman. No matter how powerful she was, there were too many ships in the wraith armada for her to take on alone — already, countless vessels were overtaking the area where she rampaged, sailing toward the

Night Garden outside her reach.

And the Dutchman itself was drawing closer and closer.

Severing the mast of a ghostly ship and shattering its deck with a devastating strike of the flat side of the scythe, Jet paused for a moment and looked back.

'...How much longer?'

She seemed to have bought her soldiers enough time. With Jet destroying the forward ships and the tall waves slowing down the advance of the eerie fleet, they managed to reload the cannons in time.

Looking up, she saw the dark chasms of twenty-four enormous barrels staring at her from the living ship's deck.

It was only then that Jet realized how unpleasant it was to be on the receiving end of these dark, terrifying siege weapons.

'Damnation.'

In the next moment, the cannons thundered, sending twenty-four incandescent orbs of essence-infused metal flying at the ghostly fleet with terrible speed.

It was really like a swarm of meteors was plummeting from the sky.

…The impact was not that different from a celestial calamity, either.

The spectral ships that had overtaken Jet's area of control were erased from existence, exploding into pale flashes of eerie light. The Night Garden had received a bit more breathing room.

But it was still not enough.

Jet knew that there would be no third salvo. The ghost ships would reach her Citadel, and the ancient wraiths would board it soon — with her most powerful warriors lured away by Old Tom, the defenders of the Night Garden would inevitably sustain casualties while trying to repel the attack.

And then, the mist would swallow the world, heralding the arrival of the Dutchman.

What would happen next, Jet did not know.

Pursing her lips, she delivered the finishing blow to the mangled ghost ship and leaped to the next one. Landing on its deck, she slaughtered her way to its stern and climbed the steps there, gazing at the vast wraith armada over the vanishing phantom of the slain captain.

By then, there were already wisps of mist floating over the restless water around her.

She could see the Dutchman far better than ever before, too.

Its tall sides, the countless scars marring the battered expanse of its hull, the gaping wounds where it had been breached by untold attacks… its tattered sails, its skeletal masts, the eerie desolation of its vast deck…

And the ethereal figure standing at its bridge, shrouded in a torn cloak.

Jet looked at the captain of the Dutchman, and felt him looking back.

From that distance, she couldn't discern much about him. The man — if it was, indeed, a man — was tall, with broad shoulders and an imposing posture. His figure was elusive and ghostly, as if he were there and not at the same time. She couldn't see his face, but…

She thought she glimpsed his eerie eyes.

Two piercing, sea-colored flames were burning in the pale shadow of his ghastly face, regarding her with a chilling calmness.

Sensing a subtle change in the motion of the sea, Jet smiled faintly as she met his gaze.

'Finally.'

Just then, the word underwent a strange transformation.

The sun plummeted into the waves, leaving a trail of light behind it. Darkness enveloped the world, and radiant silver streaks crossed out the sky. Then, the sun shot from behind the eastern horizon, chasing away the darkness — only to drown in the west a few moments later.

The breathtaking spectacle repeated itself several times, as if someone had hit the fast-forward button and sent time flowing at an astonishing pace. But it all ended swiftly, and the Stormsea was suddenly enveloped by the darkness of the night.

Countless stars ignited in the vast black sky.

Which meant…

Jet's smile widened a little.

In the next moment, the radiance of the distant stars grew brighter, and the starlight was woven into a vast silver net. It fell upon the wraith armada, slicing dozens of ships apart and destroying them in mere moments. A cold wind blew across the sea, sending Jet's hair flying.

That was Aether unleashing his Aspect. Now that the night had fallen, he could finally call upon the stars to destroy their enemies — and the starlight he summoned seemed like the nemesis of the ghostly fleet.

The first time the Night Garden had clashed with the wraiths commanded by the Dutchman, it was the young Saint of Night who had turned the tide.

Jet remained still, looking at the captain of the Dutchman with a cold smile.

He looked at her too as the starlight poured on the spectral vessels of the ghostly armada, piercing them like a rain of silver spears.

'Well, what will it be?'

Would he press the attack or call a retreat?

Was she imagining things… or did she see an echo of a faint,

terrifying smile on the face of the mysterious wraith, as well?

A few moments later, the captain of the Dutchman looked away.

The mist swelled, and the fearsome silhouette of the ghastly flagship was swallowed by it, vanishing without a trace.

The vessels of the wraith armada disappeared, as well, gone like the vestiges of an eerie nightmare.

The wall of mist was torn apart by the wind.

Soon enough, the surface of the sea calmed down, and nothing hinted that there had been a fleet of phantoms on its surface just a few moments ago.

The battle in the depths seemed to have concluded as well, since no tentacles rose from the depths to attack the Night Garden anymore.

Jet lingered for a few moments, then let out a relieved sigh.

It seemed that they had survived another day…

Chapter-2614: Late to the Party

The battle was over.

The mist dissipated, and the foaming water calmed down. The wraith armada was gone, having vanished like a fleeting apparition. Old Tom had retreated back into the abyssal depths.

The Night Garden had earned several new scars, its living hull slowly repairing itself in the pale starlight. The Awakened soldiers emerged from under the deck, and the Ascended officers who had manned the cannons were catching their breath while leaning on the railings, a cold breeze caressing their pale faces.

Soul Reaper Jet had already returned aboard her ship — somewhat battered, but mostly unscathed. Her armor was in need of some mending, so she dismissed it in favor of a set of comfortable mundane clothes.

Not long after, the Saints of Night climbed onto the deck of the Night Garden, as well. They were met with loud cheers — facing Old Tom in the dark depths of the Stormsea was an admirable act, after all, not to mention the awesome feat of driving the horrid creature away. On top of that, everyone was under the impression that they had fought the fiend alone.

While Naeve and Bloodwave were being celebrated by the Awakened soldiers, Sunny crawled out of the shadows in the quiet seclusion of Jet's private garden and sprawled on the grass with a groan.

He felt absolutely miserable.

'All that for nothing…'

In the end, he had let Old Tom go. It was unclear whether he could have defeated it otherwise, out there in the abyssal depths, but Sunny

still felt disappointed that he had not even received a chance to try.

He would have probably pursued the eerie horror if he had been alone, but at the moment, he also had to consider the Night Garden and its passengers. So, Sunny had chosen the less unhinged strategy and swallowed his desire to tear Old Tom limb from limb, returning to the surface instead.

Now, he was enduring the torment of his wounds with nothing to show for it. At the end there, he had been forced to face the horror of the depths without the defensive barrier of a Shell, in his true form — that of a vast, formless shadow. That had helped him salvage the battle, but also left him vulnerable to receiving soul damage.

That was fine, though, because Soul Weave was already mending his tattered soul… and somewhere in the depths, Old Tom was suffering, as well, having been poisoned by his Death Will.

Thinking about that last part made Sunny feel much better, filling him with vindictive joy.

Saint stood silently to his left, guarding his sprawled form. Slayer, meanwhile, was leaning against a tree some distance away, almost indistinguishable from the deep shadows around her.

Soon enough, Jet joined him in the garden, as well.

Sitting down nearby, she let out a long sigh and said in a wistful tone:

"It's strange, isn't it? We did not lose the battle, and yet, it doesn't feel like we've won it either."

Sunny spared her a brief glance and shrugged.

"Doesn't seem strange at all."

He lingered for a few moments, and then asked:

"That creepy feeling I got while fighting Old Tom… the Dutchman made an appearance, didn't it?"

Jet nodded.

"Yes, just as expected. It vanished once the night fell, though."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Did Aether chase it away?"

Jet remained silent for a while, then sighed again.

"It was not so much that it was scared away by Aether as that it chose to leave once the stars, and the map hidden in them, revealed themselves once again. We, Old Tom, and the Dutchman are not the only candidates left in the race, after all. So, I think it simply decided not to waste time, especially considering that the Night Garden had already sustained some damage by then."

She paused.

"In truth… I managed to vanquish a few ships, but the ones destroyed by Aether and your cannons are not really gone. They were simply dispelled, so they'll return after a while. So, the damage we dealt to the ghost fleet was negligible."

Jet gave him a dark look.

"If I am correct, then the ghost sailors are merely emanations of the ship — lost souls bound to their sinister vessels and imprisoned by them, forever. Every time the sailors are destroyed, they return into the holds, and then get summoned to man the ships again later, in a never-ending cycle."

She exhaled slowly.

"Well, unless someone like me ends it. The ships themselves are merely emanations of the Dutchman, though — when they are destroyed, the wells of souls contained within them are drawn back into its great hold, in turn, so the ghost armada can never really be vanquished unless the Dutchman itself is destroyed. It's like one big cursed nesting doll... that is what I concluded after sinking a few of those creepy ships, at least."

Jet sighed and looked at the stars.

"The only thing I am not clear on is the captain of the Dutchman. Is he just another prisoner of that cursed ship, or is the ship and its curse manifestations of his power? I do not know."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"I have no idea, either."

Jet remained silent for a while.

"The Dutchman and its ghost fleet remind me of something, though. I've met a similar being before, I think."

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, of course you have. I am right here."

Indeed, what Jet described was eerily similar to Sunny's own Shadow Legion. His shadows shared a kind of kinship with wraiths, and they too could never truly be destroyed, only vanquished for a while — banished back to the dark expanse of his soul, where they were mended and repaired by its tenebrous flames.

…Unless someone like Jet got involved, that was.

She shook her head slowly.

"No, I don't mean you."

After considering something for a moment or two, she added:

"A while back, I killed a Great Devil… the Heart of Kanakht. It commanded a swarm of imprisoned souls, as well."

Sunny blinked a few times, thinking about the implications.

Eventually, he shrugged.

"Well, we will inevitably learn more about the Dutchman soon — whether we want to or not."

The Night Garden was resting now, drifting among the waves, but it would continue the journey to the Eternal City soon. Whatever dangers they had faced along the way would most likely pale in comparison to what was waiting for them there.

He hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"So, what are we going to do? Chase after Old Tom and the Dutchman in hopes of getting to the Eternal City first?"

Jet shook her head slowly.

"The Night Garden is damaged, and you don't look too good either. It is better to wait a couple of days and arrive at the party in top shape. There's no telling what will meet us at the end of the road, after all — but there's definitely going to be a slaughterhouse just shy of it. So, we should give the other contenders a chance to properly greet each other before joining the fun."

Sunny smiled lazily.

"Fun, you say? Aren't you afraid that they will get to the prize before us?"

Jet chuckled and shook her head.

"Not at all."

He gave her a surprised look.

"What? Why?"

Standing up, she glanced at him with pity and shook her head.

"I mean… the road to the Eternal City is already that bad. Whatever is hidden there is bound to be ten times worse, though. And that's not something even the likes of Old Tom or the Dutchman can deal with in a day or two."

Laughing quietly, Jet nodded at Saint and walked away.

Left alone, Sunny turned to the stars and spent some time enjoying

the quiet rustle of the leaves in peace.

After a while, he murmured:

"That makes me wonder... hmm, maybe I need to get myself a garden, too…"

Chapter-2615: No Regrets

Several days later, the Night Garden had largely repaired itself. There were still marks left on the weathered surface of its hull, but they did not affect its overall durability. Sunny was feeling better, as well, and the soldiers had received a much-needed reprieve from the draining intensity of the perilous voyage.

Guided by the stars, the living ship resumed its journey. Sunny and Jet had both turned somber and taciturn, knowing that the Eternal City — and the unknown dangers waiting for them there — were drawing close now.

Jet had entrusted the helm of the Night Garden to Aether and walked to the bow of the titanic ship, looking at the distant horizon with a contemplative expression. Starlight infused the darkness with a pale silver radiance, and the cold breeze was blowing from the west, ruffling her raven-black hair. Her icy blue eyes seemed to glow with a chilling shine in the dark expanse of the quiet night.

After a while, a black crow landed on her shoulder, waited for a few moments, and then pecked her on the cheek, as if to see if she was alive. Jet pushed the Echo off with an irritated scowl.

"This again? In your dreams, idiot."

Pushed off her shoulder, Crow Crow scrambled to take flight and flew up to land on a piece of the ship's rigging a few meters away. There, it opened its wings and stared at her with righteous indignation.

"Corpse! Corpse!"

It jumped up and down a couple of times, as if wanting to express a complaint.

"Food! Food!"

Jet gave it an unamused glance.

"Not this corpse."

Then, looking at it darkly, she added in a husky voice:

"Bird. Soup."

Crow Crow stared at her silently for a few moments, then folded its wings and took a few hurried hops away… just to be safe.

A pale smile appeared on Jet's lips.

Not long after that, Sunny emerged from her shadow and leaned on the railing, giving Crow Crow a curious glance.

"I've always meant to ask… that Echo of yours, it's unusually animated, isn't it?"

Jet remained silent for a bit, then turned to him and shrugged.

"I guess."

She called Crow Crow over and ruffled its feathers.

"It was a gift from the old man. So, Crow Crow is a bit special."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"The old man? Wake of Ruin?"

Jet nodded absentmindedly, then looked at him with a wry smile.

"Why? Is that so surprising?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, not sure how to answer. Wake of Ruin was a cantankerous old man, and his personality left a lot to be desired. It was hard to imagine him giving gifts to his subordinates, even if there seemed to be a complicated relationship between him and Jet.

"No, it's just… he doesn't strike me as a generous man."

Jet grinned.

"You're an astute judge of character, Sunny."

Sunny remained silent for a while, remembering the bits and pieces of what he knew about Jet's past. The kind of advice she gave him in his youth spoke volumes about what her own experiences had been, but Jet never mentioned the details directly.

Eventually, he asked with a hint of caution in her voice:

"Your work for the government… it has not always been entirely voluntary, has it?"

Jet lingered for a few moments, then offered him a noncommittal shrug.

"Well, as far as relationships go, that one used to be a bit toxic at times."

She sighed and looked at the dark expanse of undulating water in front of them.

"But you are wrong if you think that it was not voluntary. It is true that after discovering my Flaw, they put a leash around my neck and exploited me… but I chose to be exploited myself. I needed to kill in order to survive, and I knew that the government would provide me with plenty of prey. So I was using them, as well. It was a mutual relationship, no matter how toxic."

Jet fell silent for a bit and then shivered slightly.

"Gods know it was way better than what would have happened to me in a Legacy clan. That, I don't even want to think about."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What about going independent?"

Jet looked at him with a faint smile.

"You must have always been strong, Lord of Shadows. Most

Awakened can't survive in the Dream Realm alone — I certainly couldn't, especially considering the demands of my Flaw. I haven't always been the Soul Reaper, after all. I was quite weak and unremarkable, out there in the beginning."

She looked away and let out a sigh.

"But even if I could have… I am glad that I didn't. Left to my own devices, I would have swiftly gone feral. And then, I would have truly become a walking corpse, slowly rotting away while not caring about anything except satisfying my base desires — until there was nothing left of me except for an unfeeling, murderous husk."

Jet shook her head.

"People like us tend to value independence, Sunny, but there has to be something in our lives larger than us. It is fine to live an unremarkable life… but it all falls apart when power is added to the equation. We did not choose to wield power, but it was thrust upon us nonetheless — not that we would have refused it if we could. No one who had tasted true weakness would ever refuse power, after all."

She turned and looked at him, her usual laidback smile long gone.

"But power corrupts, Sunny. Its corruption is no less insidious than the Corruption of the Void, so one needs something greater than themselves to stave it off — just like Neph and her Domain stave off Corruption from the millions of mundane humans living in the Dream Realm. It can be principles, conviction, duty, devotion, or faith… anything that keeps you going even when all you want to do is fall down, and reminds you where you were heading in the first place."

Jet studied him somberly, then suddenly gave him an easy smile and looked away.

"Personally, I sort of stumbled on what keeps me going by accident. I joined the government out of necessity, developed a misguided sense of professional pride, and only then found meaning in what I do. So, despite all the ugly things that happened along the way, I consider myself lucky. Oh, and it wasn't all bad. There were nice moments,

too… really, if you think about it, I am nothing short of blessed."

Sunny remained silent for a long while, looking at her with a subdued expression. Then, inhaling deeply, he asked:

"So, no regrets?"

Jet chuckled.

"Life is too short for regret. Plus, look at me…"

She smiled faintly.

"Wielding fearsome power, ruling a beautiful city, enjoying the respect and adoration of countless people, and living in a fancy palace with a private garden. Who would have thought that a dull, timid girl from the outskirts whom no one cared about would end up that way? For a dead woman, I did pretty well for myself. Don't you think?"

Sunny smiled.

"Yes… pretty well, I'd say."

He lingered for a bit, the smile slowly draining from his face.

"So, let me ask you a question."

Jet gave him a curious look.

"Sure, go ahead."

Sunny considered his words for a while.

He wanted to ask Jet the same thing he had asked Effie and Kai — whether she would discard personal freedom in pursuit of something that demanded complete submission, whether she would surrender herself completely to something that left her no choice but utter devotion…

But now, he realized that there was no point in asking.

Because Jet had already answered.

Her answer remained the same as it had been all those years ago, remaining as firm as her quiet, unassuming determination.

Sunny sighed.

"Well… that place where you are heading to. What does it look like?"

Jet laughed.

"Oh, that old thing?"

She paused for a few moments.

"Why, it's a world where people can live in peace and prosperity. A world where everyone is afforded the dignity they deserve and doesn't have to suffer bloodshed and strife. A gentle world… a place where kindness trumps cruelty."

Saying that, Jet looked away and smiled wistfully.

"...Funnily enough, it is also a place where someone like me can never exist. Isn't that ironic? There is no space for me in the world I am building. So, in a way, that makes me the architect of my own destruction."

Sunny remained silent, not knowing how to answer.

Perhaps there was no need to answer, to begin with.

They stayed quiet side by side as the Night Garden sailed across the waves, drawing closer and closer to the mysterious places the path to which was written in the stars.

Where untold horrors and dreadful creatures were waiting for them, ready to tear them apart.

The stars shone softly, illuminating their thorny path.

Chapter-2616: Finish Line

Carried by invisible winds, the Night Garden could reach truly astonishing speed. Still, it took the living ship two more days to reach the area pointed out by the stars — a measure of time largely meaningless in the Stormsea, where the movement of celestial bodies was odd and unpredictable, but was still used by humans both out of habit and out of necessity.

Most of that time had been spent battling a calamitous storm, but at the end of the second day, the winds died down, and the unbridled fury of the Stormsea was replaced by an eerie calm. Instead of the blinding radiance of cascading bolts of lightning and an unceasing torrent of rain, wisps of fog drifted above the endless expanse of rolling waves.

The stars revealed themselves from behind the cloud just long enough to give the Saints of Night an opportunity to confirm that the Night Garden had reached its destination, and were then swiftly swallowed by a veil of mist. The world brightened, leaving the cold embrace of darkness in favor of the pale ambivalence of twilight.

Not needing the star map anymore, Sunny deactivated the enchantment that had revealed it to the world. The Night Garden might not have been the first to reach the destination, but that way, it would be the last.

The living ship slowed down, drifting cautiously through the mist. Nobody knew what to expect from this place, so both the soldiers and their commanders were tense, staring into the grey vastness of the misty sea with apprehension.

Sounds traveled far in the fog, so the measured murmur of waves splashing against the hull of the Night Garden could be heard even from the great height of its deck.

"Well, this has gone better than I expected."

Jet and Sunny were at the observation deck at the bow of the titanic ship. No different from the soldiers, they stared into the mist, trying to determine what was awaiting them ahead. The Eternal City was supposed to be here, somewhere… but the map was not exactly rich with detail about what it looked like, and what obstacles approaching it posed.

Of course, they were not merely looking. Sunny had cast his shadow sense far and wide, enveloping a vast swath of the Stormsea in a net of his perception. Jet, meanwhile, had sent Crow Crow to scout ahead and report its findings to her.

Feeling a little disturbed by what he sensed, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Better than expected? How do you mean?"

She shrugged with an easy smile.

"I mean that we reached the destination without suffering catastrophic damage or grievous casualties. The worst that has happened is being beset by a dozen or so of chillingly powerful abominations and an unimaginable horror or two… smooth sailing, really."

Sunny gave her a dubious look, then said in a slightly offended tone:

"You had really low expectations for the feasibility of this expedition, it seems."

Jet grinned.

"Having low expectations is the secret of living life free of disappointment, after all."

She lingered for a few moments, then inhaled deeply and furrowed her brow.

"What is that smell?"

The water was far below them, but underestimating the senses of a Saint was never a good idea. Sunny still gave Jet a surprised look.

"You can smell it?"

He looked down somberly.

"It's blood."

Jet could not see it because of the mist, but actually, this entire area of the Stormsea had turned a vivid shade of red, having been contaminated by an unimaginable amount of blood. Sunny could not discern its color either, but he could sense other things.

The Night Garden drifted forward, sailing on a sea of blood. It wasn't simply moving through the red waves, though — the hull of the living ship was absorbing the blood, subtly clearing the water around it. From time to time, a mangled chunk of flesh would brush against its bow, and be consumed, as well.

It was quite an eerie scene, to say the least.

Sunny sighed.

"This whole area is drowned in blood and littered with torn corpses… pieces of torn corpses, at least. I think your decision to arrive late was wise. It seems like a terrible battle concluded here just recently — the Nightmare Creatures who were still in the race must have clashed for the chance to reach the Eternal City."

There was Old Tom and the Dutchman, but there must have been many more abominations whom the Night Garden had never encountered. The Stormsea was vast, after all, and not every contender had been following the stars from its eastern reaches. The weaker of the dreadful fiends would have perished on the way, but the strongest and truly harrowing ones would have all made it here.

And then, they would have eradicated each other, with the most terrible one emerging as victor.

Sunny hummed.

"Maybe we should find mysterious star maps more often. Then, the Nightmare Creatures would do us a favor and all kill each other."

It wasn't half bad, to have some of the greatest threats in the Stormsea reduce their own population so thoroughly.

That said… the being who had slaughtered all these ancient horrors and came out on top was still out here, somewhere, already approaching the Eternal City. Sunny would have to face it there, so his satisfaction was overshadowed by dark anticipation.

As if to illustrate his description, a dark shape suddenly revealed itself from the mist. It was as wide as a small island, protruding a few hundred meters above the waves — so, it seemed small and insignificant in front of the towering wall of the Night Garden's hull.

It was a chunk of flesh torn from the body of some enormous monstrosity.

As the living ship drew closer, it dwarfed the grotesque island of mangled flesh even more, then effortlessly pushed it aside.

Sunny sighed.

"All this meat… going to waste…"

Jet gave him a strange look, then rolled her eyes.

"Nothing is stopping you from diving down to salvage it, you know."

Sunny shivered.

"No thanks. Why would I? I don't even need to eat, actually…"

She looked away with a faint smile.

For a while, there was nothing but silence between them. Tendrils of mist moved slowly across the deck of the Night Garden, and countless lanterns illuminating it shone like islands of warm light in the cold expanse of twilight vastness.

Some time later, Sunny frowned. Noticing his somber expression, Jet

raised her scythe a little.

"What is it?"

He lingered for a few moments, then grimaced.

"Nothing. That's the thing — I sense nothing. There is no sign of the Eternal City anywhere around us, for at least a hundred kilometers in every direction."

There were no signs of anything that could lead them to it, either, like a stele with runes carved into it or ancient gates that opened a portal to some unknown location.

Considering that the Eternal City could not be reached by usual means, Sunny would not be surprised to encounter something like that.

But there was nothing except for the vast expanse of the bloody sea, the mist, and the morbid remnants of the terrible battle that had happened here.

Not long after, Crow Crow returned from its patrol and landed on Jet's shoulder, cawing loudly:

"Crow! Back!"

She winced and tilted her head, moving her ear away from the small bird's black beak.

"Yes, yes. Good job. Did you find something in the mist, yes or no?"

Crow Crow stared at her for a few moments, then fluttered its wings proudly.

"No! No!"

Jet let out an exasperated sigh.

After remaining silent for a short while, she asked in an uncertain tone:

"That map wouldn't have led us to nothing at all, would it?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Definitely not. Everything Weaver did had a reason… plus, whoever won the battle is nowhere to be seen. They would have hung around if there had been no path to the Eternal City here, searching. The fact that they are not here suggests that there is a path after all… I think."

Jet sighed.

"Well, let's continue exploring."

The Night Garden continued to drift through the fog, but even after several hours, Sunny could not sense anything in the vast area around them.

In situations like this one, it was usually best not to hurry… they could slowly explore this region of the Stormsea in search of clues, spending days or even weeks to accomplish the task.

However, Sunny was pressed for time. Time was not standing still in the rest of the world, after all, and things that demanded his attention were slowly accumulating.

Plus, they had competition. The monster who had triumphed in the dreadful battle was already ahead of them in the race, nearing the finish line or already there — so, Sunny could not wait that long.

Luckily — or unfortunately — he had a way to save them quite a bit of time.

Grimacing, Sunny summoned Weaver's Mask and said as it settled on his face:

"Oh, I am looking forward to this so much…"

Chapter-2617: Black Skies

The last time Sunny had used [Where is my eye?] enchantment of Weaver's Mask, his own eyes were burned, rendering him blind. In fact, his vision recovered fully only just recently — so, naturally, he did not want to lose it again on the eve of a perilous battle.

However, there was a learning curve to everything.

The fact that he had been seriously harmed the first time around did not mean that he would suffer just as badly now. Back then, Sunny had not known what touching the Strings of Fate implied, so he treated them carelessly.

He believed that things would be different now. If he held himself back, the damage he sustained would probably be significantly reduced… granted, he would learn much less as a result, as well, catching maybe only a glimpse or two.

And even if his expectation was proven wrong, he would still be able to fight quite well by relying on shadow sense.

The danger of witnessing something he was not supposed to see still remained, though.

'Nothing ventured, nothing gained…'

With a sigh, Sunny gave Jet a poignant stare.

Would he end up on the floor again?

'No, but seriously, what is it with Jet and slapping me back to my senses?'

That was how their relationship started, and even all these years later, things were still the same.

Knowing that there was no point in stalling, Sunny activated [Where is my eye?].

Once again, the inconceivable vastness of the torn tapestry of fate revealed itself to him. And once again, he was completely overwhelmed by it.

This time, however, his experience helped him shut most of it out faster. Following the steps he had taken before, Sunny limited the scope of his perception to only one tiny fraction of the unfathomable infinity of endless threads, concentrating only on those of them that had to do with this area of the Stormsea.

He had an easier time searching for a thread having to do with the Eternal City because he knew that the Night Garden was connected to it — had been built there, even. So, the String of Fate he was searching for would pass through the living ship, as well.

It did not take him long to discover a worthy candidate. Not too far from him, a strange thread extended from the sky into the sea, piercing the deck of the Night Garden. There was an odd duality to it, with the upper reaches of it being woven out of silver starlight, while the lower were woven out of impenetrable darkness.

Reaching for the unusual String of Fate, Sunny brushed his fingers against it. This time, he was careful to only touch for a brief moment and instantly pull away — that way, he hoped, the truth revealed to him would be modest in scope, and therefore, his eyes and his mind would be spared most of the damage.

His hope turned out not to be unfounded.

But before Sunny confirmed it, he was assaulted by an astonishing vision.

'What… what the hell is this?'

He was horrified for a moment, because what met him… was a boundless, dark void.

However, thankfully enough, it was not the Void. It was merely a void…

An infinite, silent, empty expanse of vacuous darkness where nothing existed — no life, no warmth, not even air. Only deadly rays of cosmic radiation and invisible blossoms of gravity fields.

And in that darkness, countless stars burned with beautiful silver light.

Sunny was stunned.

'Holy hell. I'm... in space.'

Indeed, this was the great vacuum of space. But at that moment, he realized something else, as well.

That this was also the Black Skies, the true realm of the Goddess of Night.

And there, among the stars, a beautiful city with tall silver spires bathed in the starlight…

Sunny pulled his hand away, and the vision of the Eternal City vanished from his straining mind.

'What the… so it's in space?'

Sunny remained motionless for what felt like an eternity, but only lasted a brief moment.

No, that did not make sense… as much as everything never made sense in the Dream Realm. Nightwalker had managed to board the Night Garden and sail away from the Eternal City, and at the moment, the Night Garden could not fly, let alone travel between stars.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then tentatively touched the String of Fate once more.

He saw the Eternal City once again. Only, this time, it was in a state of chaos.

It was under attack.

A vast presence moved in the darkness beyond the city. Its form and shape were impossible to discern, since it was indistinguishable from the darkness of space — perhaps it was the darkness itself — and the only way to perceive its existence was by watching the vast swathes of stars be obscured by its passing.

The presence was horrifying, unfathomable, and full of cold, indifferent, obliterating intent.

Wherever her pale gaze fell, the immortal denizens of the Eternal City were unmade. The silver spires melted and fell, and the very fabric of the celestial abode was consumed by entropy.

But then, the city rose from the dust.

Its fabric was mended, the spires coalesced from incandescent pools of liquid matter, and the living beings were restored to their pristine youthfulness…

Only to be destroyed again.

A million cycles of death and restoration, passed in the blink of an eye.

It was an eternity of devastation.

The immortals screamed in terror as they died, and wept in horror as they were mercilessly brought back to life.

Moments flowed into seconds, and seconds flowed into minutes. Minutes turned into hours, and hours turned into days. Days…

Sunny pulled his hand away and staggered, horrified.

'What did I just see?'

Trembling, he imagined the dreadful scene once more.

Slowly, hesitantly, he realized what he had witnessed…

It was a battle.

It had been a battle between Storm God and the Demon of Repose.

Then…

There was only one thing he needed to learn.

Drawing in a shaky breath, Sunny extended his hand toward the String of Fate once more.

He saw how the Eternal City fell.

Chapter-2618: Fallen City

Sunny dismissed Weave's Mask and stared into the mist with a hollow look on his face.

Jet, who was standing nearby with a raised hand, lowered it slowly.

"Huh? Your eyes are not cooked."

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then turned to her, the golden glow slowly disappearing from the deep darkness of his dilated pupils.

Eventually, he grimaced.

"Still hurts like hell, though."

His eyes had not turned into embers, this time, but the last image he had seen did end up burned into them, so his vision was a bit blurry. It was going to pass swiftly, though, so he did not mind that much.

Jet studied him, then asked in a neutral tone:

"Well? Did you divine any clues?"

Sunny could not understand what she meant, then realized that she considered his mysterious ability a form of divination. Which… it was, in a sense.

He nodded slowly.

"Yes. It fell into the sea."

Jet blinked a few times.

"What fell into the sea?"

Sunny just stared at her.

"The Eternal City. It fell into the sea."

Turning around, he raised a hand and pointed at the sky.

Well… he pointed into the mist, but his intention was to point at the sky.

"It entered the atmosphere, burning like a falling sun, glided majestically down to the horizon, and hit the water like an enormous asteroid. That thing was the size of NQSC, too, so the explosion its impact caused… well, I guess it was in the same weight category as when Nephis detonated six of her cores in Godgrave. Catastrophic on a global scale. That latter happened below ground, however, while the former had happened in the middle of a damn sea."

He inhaled deeply.

"Needless to say, the entire city was vaporized. But the Demon of Repose did not care, I guess, because it still restored itself to flawless condition, complete with all the immortals populating it. And then, it drowned."

Sunny looked down, at the wooden deck beneath them.

"So, the map is pointing to the right spot. It's just that it doesn't have a vertical axis. We are in the right place, but… way above our destination."

Jet scratched the tip of his nose.

"How did Nightwalker manage to sail away on the Night Garden, then?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"I have no idea. Why are you asking me? Go ask Nightwalker."

He remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Maybe the Night Garden was at the bottom of the sea, as well.

Actually, it is good news for us."

Jet raised an eyebrow.

"It is?"

Sunny nodded.

"It is a fact that the Eternal City is at the bottom of the Stormsea, and it is also a fact that Nightwalker used the Night Garden to escape the Eternal City and sail to the safer waters near the coast. Which proves my theory that this ship is not just a ship… it can also be a submarine."

He lingered for a moment, and then smiled in bewilderment.

"It can also be a spaceship, actually. We're on a spaceship, Jet."

She gave him a suspicious look.

"That's cool. However, don't think I don't know why you're saying that."

Sunny looked at her with an oblivious look.

"Huh? Whatever do you mean?"

She smiled dangerously.

"You said it to distract me from the fact that you want to sink my ship, didn't you? You want to try submerging the Night Garden and diving to the bottom of the sea."

Sunny let out a chuckle, as if amazed by the preposterous nature of that remark.

Then, he added in a small tone:

"Yes?"

Jet let out a long sigh.

"I'll give you that we can probably submerge the Night Garden by

flooding the freshwater reservoir. However, your theory about the aegis holding the water at bay is questionable at best, and completely unfounded at worst. And since we can hardly test it without causing severe damage to the surface infrastructure of the city… it's a no."

Sunny, who was secretly reeling from catching a small glimpse of the harrowing battle between a god and a daemon, smiled weakly.

"Who says that we can't test it?"

He commanded the shadows to rise, manifesting them into a miniature model of the Night Garden. Then, he built a translucent dome above its deck, and another one — a little smaller, and completely black — below it.

"I don't think I ever tried manifesting shadows on that scale, but I am certain that I can cover all of the Night Garden with an airtight dome. We will submerge the ship until its masts are underwater and see if the aegis prevents the water from reaching that dome. If it does, we can descend further. If it doesn't, we simply surface again, send the Night Garden back to the coast, and venture to the bottom of the Stormsea by our lonesome… you and I."

Jet still had a dubious expression on her face.

"Why are you so keen on taking the Night Garden to the Eternal City?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then sighed.

"Because the Dreamspawn is on the Moon."

Jet raised an eyebrow.

"So wh… oh."

She fell silent for a moment, then gave him a calculating look.

"You're hoping that if we restore the Night Garden to its former glory, we will be able to attack that man before he attacks us?"

Sunny lingered for a while.

"It is one of the reasons, yes. I might not seem like it… but I am actually quite nervous about that guy. Ah, don't get me wrong — I am not worried that he'll be able to defeat me and Nephis. However, I am almost entirely certain that if he brings the fight to either the waking world or the Dream Realm, there will be a lot of collateral damage... a lot of it. If we take the fight to him, though… there are no civilians on the Moon."

Jet studied him for a bit.

Eventually, she grimaced and looked away.

"We can try flooding the reservoir. However, we will only continue the descent after making sure that the citizens of the Night Garden are completely safe, and that we can summon Neph's Dream Gate underwater to retreat at the first sign of overwhelming danger."

Sunny simply gave her a nod.

"Naturally."

Then, glancing into the mist, he hesitated for a few moments and asked:

"What's on the bottom of the Stormsea, anyway?"

Jet turned around and started walking away, a troubled expression on her face.

Her answer did not make him any less apprehensive.

"Nobody knows. Because nobody has ever reached the bottom of the Stormsea. If we do... we will be the first humans to learn..."

Chapter-2619: Immersion

The Night Garden slowly sank into a sea of blood.

The deck had been cleared by then, with all the soldiers joining the civilians in the city below. The runic hall was cleared of all non-essential personnel, with only the Saints of Night keeping Jet and Sunny company. The enchanted circle shimmered faintly as Jet deepened her connection to the living ship, drawing more and more water into the vast reservoir at the lowest layer of its vertical structure.

The trees growing in the parks and groves on the main deck of the Night Garden swayed, and the water in the lakes rippled. Far below, the waves foamed as the titanic ship slowly began to submerge.

Sunny observed the process from the great height of the runic hall for a while, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

As the ship submerged, the deep shadows populating its main deck stirred, growing deeper and darker. Then, they began to flow upward all across its outer perimeter, climbing higher and higher into the air. Jet and the Saints of Night observed the process with guarded expressions, their eyes widening slightly.

It was an incredible sight, indeed.

The Night Garden was more than a dozen kilometers in length, and at the moment, darkness rose all across its vast expanse like streams of ink flowing up the surface of an invisible glass dome.

Sunny frowned, concentrating.

Soon enough, the streams of darkness fused and climbed higher than the roof of the towering pagoda where the runic hall, the bridge of the Night Garden, was located. The dome of shadows closed,

obscuring the twilight of the outside world — it was as if the living ship was hidden in a great cavern, the warm glow of its lanterns illuminating the echoing darkness.

The shadows hardened, turning into black obsidian.

"Ah, I wonder…"

Sunny found himself wondering if, maybe, the Shadow Realm itself had been created in a similar fashion — only on a much, much greater scale.

Jet let out a quiet sigh.

"Damn. No matter how many times I witness a Sovereign unleashing their power, it never gets any less… humbling."

Sunny looked at her, suddenly curious about what Jet's own Supreme power would be. He remained silent for a few moments, then turned away.

"We are not called demigods without a reason. Attaining Supremacy means crossing the threshold between what is mundane and what is divine… so while we are not deities yet, we have a foot in the door."

He lingered a little before adding in a more somber tone:

"It is the next step that is truly vexing. Because to take it, one has to discard what little mundane — and therefore human — is left of them."

As his words echoed in the darkness, the Night Garden continued to sink. Soon enough, half of its immense mass was already underwater, and the main deck grew much closer to the surface of the sea.

Jet glanced at the Saints of Night, then addressed Naeve in a calm tone:

"Naeve, please check how things are going below deck."

The citizens of the Night Garden knew what was happening. Some had been apprehensive, but most seemed excited about the thrilling

new development.

Diving into a bottomless ocean full of eldritch abominations! Wasn't that an exciting change of scenery?

Perhaps spending time on the indestructible living ship had made them feel too safe, but the denizens of the wandering city were quite a carefree bunch — as far as Sunny was concerned, they rarely showed the level of fear and anxiety one would expect from people living in the perilous waters of the Stormsea.

But then again, Sunny could somewhat understand the strangeness of their mentality. After all, most humans were tied to their homes, and therefore to their cities — if danger arrived, they ultimately had no choice but to face it or succumb to it, since escaping was usually not an option.

What would a citizen of NQSC do if some Unholy abomination descended upon the city? Escaping into the wilderness was hardly an option, since it would mean dying of starvation, contaminated water, poisonous air, or simply the elements. Similarly, nothing but death awaited those who would want to flee Bastion or Ravenheart.

But what if their city itself could turn around and flee from danger, taking them with it?

That, Sunny thought, was a fundamentally less stressful way of life.

So, he mentally patted himself on the shoulder for procuring himself a wonderful moving castle.

'Good job...'

Come to think of it… once Sunny became Sacred, Mimic would probably be able to turn into something of a similar size to Night Garden. And while it did not possess many of the wondrous abilities that the living ship did, it had its own marvelous qualities.

'I should feed it well.'

In any case, many of the passengers of the Night Garden gathered in the sorcerous observation halls below the deck to watch the ship

submerge — instead of hiding in their homes and praying to the dead gods.

They could not see what was happening on the main deck, and the mist obscured most of the world, but still… once the surface of the sea drew close, they saw red waves breaking against the weathered hull of the living ship.

And then, they were below the water.

'Moment of truth…'

The Night Garden finally submerged enough for the waves to wash over its main deck. Of course, the dome of shadows was protecting it at the moment — but depending on how the situation developed, Sunny would either ride the Night Garden comfortably into the depths or would be forced to dive into the abyssal darkness himself, protected by nothing except the Onyx Serpent Shell.

'It's a pity I didn't kill Old Tom.'

Summoning its shade would have been quite useful, considering the circumstances.

While Sunny shivered at the memory of the gargantuan horror of the depths, the Night Garden fell deeper into the water. Finally, the waves closed above the shadow dome, and the tip of the main mast disappeared below the surface of the sea.

For a while, tense silence reigned in the runic hall. Eventually, Jet asked in a hushed tone:

"Well?"

Sunny smiled.

"Bone dry."

The shadow dome had been built to be just a little bit smaller than the invisible aegis protecting the main deck of the Night Garden. So, if that mysterious barrier was not capable of holding water at bay, the water would have washed over the manifested shadows.

However, not even a single drop touched the surface of the dome. Which meant that Sunny had been right — the Aegis was indeed capable of allowing the Night Garden to dive into the sea.

Jet let out a quiet sigh.

She remained silent for a while, and then said in a neutral tone:

"I guess that means that we are diving into the abyss…"

Chapter-2620: Sea Quest

The Night Garden continued to descend into the cold waters of the Stormsea. Sunny had allowed the dome of shadows to collapse into a torrent of flowing darkness and vanish, thus allowing Jet and the Saints of Night to see what was happening around the titanic ship.

It was a wondrous sight.

There did not seem to be anything standing in the way of water, and yet it failed to wash over the decks of the Night Garden, as if pushed away by an invisible barrier. Strangely enough, that made Sunny feel like he was a fish locked in a colossal aquarium.

Of course, an aquarium was supposed to keep aquatic forms of life alive on dry land, not the other way around.

'What is the opposite of an aquarium, though?'

A terrarium... it was probably a terrarium.

His odd thoughts were interrupted by Jet, who looked around with a wary expression on her face and said:

"We will proceed slowly. Be ready to summon that dome back if the Aegis begins leaking."

Their initial success did not guarantee safety. After all, there could be a limit to what the invisible barrier isolating the surface decks of the Night Garden from hostile environments could do. Beyond that, they did not only have water to worry about — there was also pressure, oxygen, and a dozen other things that had to be accounted for in order to ensure the safety of all passengers.

Personally, Sunny was sure that the Demon of Repose would have built and enchanted her ship properly, but he was all for taking all

the necessary precautions. After all, daemons were different from people. Who knew if they had even needed to breathe or cared about not the weight of an entire ocean resting on their shoulders?

So, there was no harm in keeping a close eye on things.

Soon, Aether and Bloodwave departed to perform various checks, leaving Sunny and Jet alone on the bridge. They watched the water flow upward past the Night Garden in silence, both secretly haunted by the memories of the Tomb of Ariel.

The sea around them was red, but the deeper the Night Garden descended, the paler its morbid hue became. Less and less light could penetrate the great mass of water, as well, so their surroundings were growing dimmer. The grotesque remains of slain Nightmare Creatures drifted past them from time to time, sinking at their own speed.

After a while, the living ship was surrounded by utter darkness, shining with countless lights in its embrace. The lanterns illuminating the Night Garden were the only source of light in the cold abyss, so, surrounded by their vibrant glow, it fell into the dark depths like a radiant nebula.

The only sounds in the dead silence of the deep sea were the quiet rustle of leaves and the soft whispers of wind that blew between the masts of the titanic ship.

Jet sighed lightly.

"At least there's wind. That is a good sign."

The presence of wind indicated that the Night Garden was producing its own oxygen, probably absorbing it from the surrounding water. The carbon dioxide generated by millions of people breathing in its depths was probably being absorbed by the trees growing on the main deck…

Which didn't really make sense, considering that there was no sun here. However, the living ship was known to have a mystical effect on all flora growing aboard it, so Sunny would not be surprised to learn that the groves on the surface decks of the Night Garden could

thrive even in these conditions.

He himself had a tree that thrived in the darkness of the Forgotten Shore, after all, out there in the courtyard of the Nameless Temple.

In any case, checking to see if the air was not growing stale was one of the tasks Aether and Bloodwave were going to perform. Naeve, meanwhile, was busy monitoring the situation on the lower decks and in the cavernous holds of the living ship, where the passengers were hidden.

Everything seemed to be going fine, at least for now. So, Sunny allowed himself to relax… but only a little.

Both he and Jet were still tense, keeping themselves in a state of battle readiness. After all, they did not know what problems the Night Garden could experience while descending into the dark depths of the Stormsea after decades of only sailing on its surface.

On top of that, there were external threats they could encounter, as well… and the nature of their environment dictated an entirely different approach to battle — one that was inherently disadvantageous for land predators like them.

Even if the descent proceeded without any accidents, though, what awaited them in the abyssal depths was the Eternal City, all the horrors populating it, and the unknown calamity that had slaughtered all the other abominations in the waters above them.

'How exciting...'

Time passed slowly.

But even after a long while... nothing seemed to happen.

The darkness of the surrounding waters had grown even more absolute. Then, it grew eerie and frightening.

Jet looked around with a total lack of amusement on her pale face and leaned on her scythe, seemingly seeking comfort in the cold steel of its ghostly blade.

"Ah, I don't like this at all."

Sunny, however, was not inclined to agree.

"I am quite happy, though."

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

He nodded to the eerie darkness outside the shimmering sphere of light produced by the Night Garden.

"I think we have more or less reached the depth where I gave up on pursuing Old Tom. The pressure was giving trouble to Naeve and Bloodwave back then, but do you feel anything now? No. The hull may be creaking a little, but it seems like the Night Garden is protecting its passengers from the weight of the sea, too."

Jet smiled faintly.

"That's true."

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"Have you been to the Chained Isles before the war?"

Jet tilted her head a little.

"Not really. Why?"

He shrugged.

"It's just that diving this deep felt like experiencing the Crushing all over again. Not the most pleasant experience."

Of course, on the Chained Isles, enormous chains prevented islands from rising too high, so he had only ever suffered the most harmless extent of the Crushing. Its full fury was far more devastating, capable of obliterating even the most powerful abominations.

The master of the Ivory Island wielded the Crushing as a Component now. If used as a weapon, it could decimate entire regions. If used as a shield, it could prevent even a god from reaching the heavenly

island unscathed.

Sunny wanted to comment on how the pressure of the abyssal depths was similar to that, but then fell silent abruptly.

Out there, in the darkness beyond the light of the Night Garden…

A colossal tentacle slowly drifted in the cold void, moving past the descending ship in the distance.

It was strangely limp and still.

Noticing his expression, Jet frowned.

"What's the matter?"

Sunny peered into the darkness for a while, silent.

Eventually, he answered in a quiet tone:

"I think it's Old Tom. It... it seems to be dead."

Chapter-2621: Good Old (Dead) Tom

Out there in the vast, cold abyss beyond the fleeting radiance of the Night Garden, a grotesque form drifted slowly on the powerful underwater currents. Its eerie shape was so vast and inconceivable that Sunny failed to fathom what he was looking at for the longest time.

"...Move forward slowly."

The Night Garden was not pushed by the wind or by oars, relying on unknown magic to sail instead. So, it did not matter whether it was gliding across the waves or moving beneath them — Jet could control its speed and direction all the same.

She did as Sunny told, changing the angle of their descent. Before, the Night Garden had been simply plummeting down through the dark abyss, but now, it pushed forward through the crushing mass of water.

Jet drew a deep breath as her gaze grew distant.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She remained silent for a moment, then shook her head.

"No, nothing. It just feels different when we move underwater — the Night Garden has to push through its mass, after all. So, there is a different relation between the effort I need to exert and the speed it can reach. There's a learning curve."

Jet sighed.

"It feels nice and liberating to glide across the sea. But here… here, it's a bit of a chore. Like running with weights tied to your ankles."

Sunny gave her a strange look.

"...Did you often run with weights tied to your ankles?"

Jet stared back.

"You didn't?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"When I ran, it was usually from something trying to eat me. Why would I go around weighing myself down?"

A corner of her mouth curved upward.

"You make a good point."

They fell silent as the Night Garden slowly drew closer to Old Tom's remains.

Sunny had to admit that he had misjudged the distance between them and the grotesque corpse. There was no curvature to the depths of the Stormsea, so there was no horizon, and there were no landscape features to serve as reference points either… only the boundless darkness.

Old Tom turned out to be much, much larger than Sunny had thought after beholding it for the first time.

"What does that thing look like?"

By then, Jet could see one of the tentacles trailing behind the sinking corpse, but the main body of the horror of the depths was still hidden in the darkness. Sunny did not hurry with the answer, though, trying to understand what Old Tom was… had been, rather… himself.

It took him until the pain of his Flaw became almost unbearable to finally make sense of the horrid visage.

"It's… an oyster, I guess."

Sunny said that, but he was not sure that he was correct.

There was indeed a hard shell akin to that of a bivalve mollusk somewhere in the terrible mess of formless flesh and tentacles that spilled from its open frame. The shell itself was the size of an island, covered by a forest of eerie black growths — beneath them, however, it glistened with dull gold, as if cast entirely from precious metal.

The gargantuan shell was dwarfed by the lifeless mass of flesh and colossal tentacles spilling out of its mouth, though. It was impossible to imagine that all that revolting flesh could have fit inside the vast confines of the golden shell… and there were other things drifting in the water beside it, as well — things that must have escaped from within Old Tom after its violent death.

There were titanic bones that must have belonged to abominable leviathans, empty shells of indestructible chitin that had once sheltered horrid monsters, rotten carcasses of countless ancient ships, mangled masses of rusted metal, vast shards of something that looked like diamond glass…

Old Tom must have gorged itself on all kinds of things over the eons.

All of it trailed behind the slowly sinking corpse like the tail of an abominable comet, dwarfing it in size.

It was obvious that all these remains had been expelled from within the hideous shell, and yet Sunny could not quite understand how. Their volume was far greater than the colossal shell.

Eventually, he narrowed his eyes.

"I think… that good Old Tom wielded dimensional powers. There must have been a pocket dimension hidden inside its shell — a dark and terrifying hell that nothing could escape after being swallowed by it. Only it was destroyed when Old Tom died, so now its body, as well as everything it had failed to digest over thousands of years, is spilling out."

If Old Tom had been able to fold space, Sunny could better

understand how its tentacles were so impossibly long, as well.

The Night Garden was close enough to the colossal shell and the vile mass of formless flesh protruding from within it for Jet to catch a glimpse of the trail of debris left in its wake, too.

She moved the ship to the side, deftly avoiding a gargantuan tentacle, and then asked in a somber tone:

"What killed it, though?"

Sunny studied the unimaginable mess of Old Tom's flesh for a while, and then said quietly:

"Both halves of its shell are shattered, with jagged holes at the center. Judging by the positioning and the size of the holes, as well as the pattern of cracks spreading from them…"

He fell silent for a moment, and then added with a hint of unease in his voice:

"Old Tom was killed in a single strike. Something unimaginably powerful pierced its shell through and destroyed its… whatever it was that had kept it alive."

Jet shivered.

"What the hell could have killed that thing in one blow?"

Sunny did not answer immediately. Eventually, however, he was forced to:

"I don't know. I don't think I could have, though."

They both remained quiet after that as the Night Garden slowly sailed past the corpse of the eerie horror of the depths and moved deeper into the abyssal darkness of the Stormsea.

Just as they were passing the terrible mass of flesh, Jet suddenly asked:

"Do you know what I'm thinking about?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"No."

She hesitated for a moment, then smiled faintly.

"I was thinking… if Old Tom is a sort of oyster. Do you think there's a pearl somewhere inside its shell? What would that pearl be?"

Sunny stared at her for a while, then shook his head energetically and looked away.

"I don't know. And I am sure as hell not climbing inside to find out!"

Laughing quietly, Jet led the Night Garden deeper into the abyss.

Her laughter, however, did not mask a somber wariness that she felt.

Sunny was wary, as well.

Chapter-2622: Gaze Into Thee

Although Sunny did not want to admit it, Old Tom's death had disturbed him quite a bit.

It was not only because of the fact how vast and terrifying the remains of the ancient horror of the depths looked, and it wasn't even because of the fact that it had been killed.

What disturbed him the most was the manner of Old Tom's death.

Sunny was not entirely sure that he could have killed the immense creature. What he was sure about, however, was that he would not have been able to finish it off in one blow.

But it had been.

Old Tom had been crushed like an annoying pest.

Knowing that there was something out there capable of doing something like that made him feel uneasy. That creature, whatever it was, was ahead of them in the race toward the Eternal City - so they would inevitably clash with it, in the end.

Sunny could not help but wonder if he could withstand a similar blow. The answer he came up with... was not very reassuring.

The Night Garden continued its descent.

It plummeted into the dark depths... and then deeper, deeper, and deeper still. The water had long started to behave strangely, and so did the world itself. At times, it felt like the very space was starting to bend and crack, crushed by the terrible pressure exerted by the vast expanse of the Stormsea. But mostly, everything around the living ship seemed terribly still.

Sunny was not sure that even his Supreme body would survive at this abyssal depth anymore.

They did not encounter any Nightmare Creatures after sailing past the grotesque, enormous corpse of the Old Time - dead or alive. Perhaps even among the abominable horrors of the depths, very few dwelled in these unfathomable depths... perhaps there was simply something special about the area where the Eternal City had drowned, repelling the abominations.

In any case, the descent of the Night Garden was eerily quiet. At some point, Sunny and Jet found themselves talking simply to hear the sound of human voices. He shared his knowledge of obscure facts about the Dream Realm, while she told stories and anecdotes about her days of serving as a government enforcer.

Eventually, however, even their voices failed to keep the suffocating silence at bay.

Hours passed, slowly flowing into days. It seemed impossible that any body of water could be this deep, and yet the Night Garden continued to descend at great speed with no sign of the seabed in sight.

The soldiers and the civilians were safely hidden below deck, so the only ones who had to face the absolute silence of the black abyss were Sunny, Jet, and the Saints of Night. If not for the rustle of leaves and the glow of the lanterns illuminating the Night Garden, they would have probably long begun to struggle mentally because of the unnatural lack of... anything, out there around them, in the darkness.

It was easy to imagine people going mad from the mere, eerie absence of everything.

Thankfully, they were too busy to lose their minds.

Despite the draining monotony of the endless descent, Sunny and his companions had a lot to do. There were countless checks to be performed to ascertain the condition of the ship, as well as other measures to ensure that everything was going according to plan.

Taught by the bitter experience of his previous two expeditions,

Sunny was regularly testing the connection between himself and his other incarnations. He also kept sending mental messages to Cassie at set intervals, to make sure that nothing interfered with their link.

As the Night Garden descended into the unfathomable depths, Cassie's voice slowly began to sound distant in his mind. However, it never disappeared altogether.

One of the most complicated tasks they had to perform was to make sure that Nephis could still open her Dream Gate near the Night Garden despite the great mass of water separating her from it. Everything seemed to be fine in that regard, too— even if coordinating the tests was growing progressively more difficult because Nephis herself was in the middle of a dangerous expedition. The most persistent threat to Sunny so far... was boredom.

Leaning on one of the arches of the runic hall, he exhaled slowly and asked in a thoughtful tone:

"What do you think will happen if Nephis opens a Dream Gate between the Stormsea and somewhere like the Nightmare Desert, then pools water in?" Aether was controlling the living ship at the moment, while Jet was sitting on the floor and leaning her back against a pillar. She gave him an amused look. "Wow, that's a great idea. Actually, that can be used as a weapon of mass destruction. Well... mass irrigation, at least."

She fell silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I guess she would quickly run out of essence despite being Supreme, considering the great volume of water that would be passing through her Gate. A new sea might still appear in the area she decides to flood, though."

Sunny whistled, already imagining where he would put a new sea.

Jet, meanwhile, sighed. "It has little practical use, however, because it would all be seawater. Otherwise, we might have been able to boost agriculture in several desolate regions of the Dream Realm by now."

Aether, who had been silent until then, suddenly spoke:

"Or she could pour it into a volcano."

Both Jet and Sunny looked at him in surprise.

"What? Why?"

Aether coughed in embarrassment.

"Oh, it's just... the explosion would be quite spectacular. I read that that was how the Minoan civilization had disappeared."

Sunny blinked a few times.

He did not know what the Minoan civilization was, and why its Supreme had decided to pour a sea into a volcano. But more importantly...

"You really think that Nephis needs new ways of producing spectacular explosions?"

Aether blushed.

"Ah... I did not think about that."

He wanted to say something else, but at that moment, Sunny's expression changed.

"Stop the ship. Slow it down, quickly!"

Jet tensed, while Aether looked at him in surprise.

Then, the runic circle shimmered slightly, and the rate of the Night Garden's descent slowly started to decline.

Torrents of water were expelled from the reservoir, and for a few brief moments, the living ship was surrounded by small, fleeting flashes of light — those were bubbles of air bursting from the obliterating pressure.

Jet jumped to her feet. Official source is novel·fire·net

"Did you sense something?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then nodded.

"Yes. I think... I sense the bottom of the sea."

Indeed, his shadow sense had perceived something solid far below the Night Garden — a vast, never- ending plane of solid ground, in fact.

It seemed that the Stormsea did have a bottom, after all.

And they were about to reach it.

Soon enough, the Night Garden came to a stop, hovering just a few hundred meters above the ground. Naeve and Bloodwave had joined them at the bridge by then, and all of them stared down with stunned expressions.

Eventually, it was Naeve who spoke first:

"It's... it's flat."

Sunny nodded slowly, confirming that it indeed was.

Below them, a perfectly flat surface stretched in all directions, with nothing at all rising above it even by a centimeter. There was no seaweed or coral, no dirt, no... anything. Just an endless expanse of flawlessly smooth, glistening glass. Or at least of something that looked like glass.

It was as if they were somehow pulled into a video game where a level failed to render, or maybe had fallen through the map. The bottom of the Stormsea looked like a placeholder excuse of proper geometry... a glaring error in the usual messiness of the natural world.

Sunny looked closer and realized that the floor of the vast sea was not actually black. Instead, it was simply perfectly transparent — but this odd glasslike material stretched so far down that there was nothing beneath it except the lack of light.

"What is this?" His voice was full of bewilderment.

After a long stretch of silence, Aether answered in a calm tone:

"It's water."

They all looked at him, failing to understand what he meant.

Aether hesitated for a moment, then explained:

"Under extreme pressure, water changes from a liquid to a solid state... and the solid state of water is ice. Only it can't become ordinary ice here, since it can't expand to form its molecular structure due to the pressure. So, it can only become a solid with a denser crystal lattice — a kind of crystal comparable to diamond in hardness. That is what we're looking at."

He smiled faintly.

"So the Stormsea doesn't really have a bottom. It's just that its waters turned solid under their own weight here."

Sunny stared at Aether for a few moments, then looked back at the flawlessly flat plane of glasslike surface below them.

Eventually, he shook his head.

"That's creepy. I can't help but feel like something is going to stare at us from below this endlessly vast, infinitely thick, perfectly transparent crystal seal..." At that moment, Jet's hand firmly blocked his mouth.

Looking at him with desperation, she whispered loudly:

"sunny! Please, please stop saying these things aloud!"

He stared at her for a moment, then nodded slowly.

When Jet removed his hand, he smiled.

"Why? If the abyss gazes at us for too long... I might just gaze back."

Then, Sunny shrugged.

"Don't worry, though. I am completely sure that there's nothing there." Instead of answering, Jet simply groaned.

Chapter-2623: Light in the Abyss

The Night Garden glided above the vast expanse of dark glass, pushing through the cold crushing abyss of unfathomable depths. The light of its lanterns glistened in the smooth black surface, and a faint reflection of the living ship traveled below it — as if the Night Garden was being pursued by its ghost.

After the first hour or so, the novelty of the flawlessly flat plane of smooth glass had grown old. From time to time, eerie shapes appeared from the darkness and slowly drifted past the living ship — those were the remains of beings and things that had sunk to the bottom of the Stormsea throughout the eons, and were too durable to be destroyed even by its impossible pressure.

There were gargantuan bones, broken frames of ancient ships, and unrecognizable ruins.

At some point, the hands of a colossal statue revealed themselves from the lightless void, outstretched toward the distant surface. They were followed by an immense face, its features long erased by the passage of time, and the broken lines of a shattered crown.

Sunny and his companions observed the titanic statue in silence.

Eventually, he sighed and shook his head.

"What was it with the people of the Dream Realm and enormous statues? It's almost impossible to go anywhere here without stumbling on at least one or two… or seven…"

Naeve, who had returned to the bridge, shrugged.

"Maybe it's because many of those people were giants themselves."

Jet, who had been resting by a pillar, opened her eyes and gave them a quiet look.

"It is simply because they could. They could afford to spend time and resources on creating majestic statues, so they did. They did not need a reason other than that — because they had not been born in a dying world being consumed by an apocalyptic war, like we were."

Her calm words ushered in a somber silence, and soon, the colossal statue disappeared into the darkness behind them.

The Night Garden moved aimlessly, searching for the Eternal City — Sunny had cast his shadow sense as far as he could, trying to find its ruins. Jet and the Saints of Night, meanwhile, were preparing for battle.

'Where are you?'

Sunny hated to admit it, but the long period of tense anticipation was starting to negatively affect his mental state. Entire days spent in a state of battle readiness, surrounded by utter darkness and suffocating silence, had tired him. The fact that nothing had happened was only making him more frustrated. And if he felt that way, then Jet and the Saints of Night were probably worse off.

Well… maybe not Jet. After all, she had always seemed relaxed and comfortable in any environment, no matter the circumstances. Now, too, it looked like she was taking a nap without a care in the world.

One of her eyes opened as soon as Sunny suddenly rose to his feet, though.

Looking ahead, he remained silent for a moment and then smiled darkly.

"Found it."

Out there, countless kilometers away, he felt a vast mass of shadows being cast on the bottom of the Stormsea. His perception of them was muddied and unclear, but he perceived at least several towering structures resting on the black glass.

Sunny looked at his companions.

"...We found the Eternal City."

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The Eternal City had let itself be known long before they could see it. At first, Sunny thought that his eyes were playing a trick on him, but then he had to admit that what he saw was true — out there, far away in front of them, the absolute darkness of the abyssal depths was chased away by pale light.

The distant radiance illuminated the great mass of water, resembling the auroras he had seen in Antarctica.

That was the great lighthouse of the Eternal City shining from the bottom of a boundless sea, still intact even thousands of years after the Demon of Repose, its supposed creator, had perished.

That radiance had served as a beacon for those traveling through the cold darkness of the Black Skies; now, it was a guiding light for those traversing the crushing black abyss of the lightless depths.

"It's a bit crazy, isn't it?"

Jet gave him a brief look.

"What is?"

Sunny shook his head in bewilderment.

"That place, the Eternal City… it survived the wrath of Storm God, fell from space, crashed into the ocean, and spent thousands of years enduring the crushing pressure on the bottom of the sea. And yet, it still seems to be intact."

He let out a chuckle.

"That's one hell of a building standard."

She smiled, then sent the Night Garden forward.

Gradually, the distant radiance drew closer. The living ship moved toward its source, slowly coming into view of the drowned city — soon enough, Sunny saw the vast ruin laying on the endless smooth expanse of black glass, illuminated by the light of its silver spires.

Only he wasn't sure that the Eternal City could be called a ruin — it seemed to be completely intact and in pristine condition, after all.

Beautiful silver spires rose above the endless expanse of black glass, emanating radiant light. Smaller buildings made from stone stood between them, with streets, squares, and vast parks. The Eternal City seemed to be protected by an aegis of its own, similar to the Night Garden — a colossal dome surrounded it, preventing the water from drowning the streets.

The entire city seemed to be separated into dozens of large islands, with roaring rivers flowing between them at great speed.

At the heart of it, a magnificent palace — or maybe a temple — towered above the landscape. The Eternal City was vast, easily competing in size with Bastion, Ravenheart, and NQSC, so Sunny could not discern the details of the palace…

And that was not what he was paying attention to, anyway.

"Crazy… it's absolutely crazy."

His expression turned somber.

Because out there, on the streets of the Eternal City, he sensed something else.

Countless shadows were moving there — shadows that belonged to living beings.

It seemed that just like the buildings, the immortal citizens of the fallen city had been restored to pristine condition, as well.

Chapter-2624: Eternal City

Jet's icy blue eyes turned even colder as she regarded the distant forest of silver spires. She inhaled deeply, and then said in a dark tone:

"I smell Nightmare Creatures."

Sunny looked at her silently.

His shadow sense could not reach deep into the dome surrounding the Eternal City, but he could still perceive some things. After lingering for a few moments, he smiled.

"Well, I have a bit of news. There's bad news… and worse news. Which do you want to hear first?"

She looked at him with no amusement in her eyes.

"Ah… I'll have the bad news first, please."

Sunny nodded.

"The city is full of powerful beings… there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of them crawling all over its streets."

The Saints of Night looked at each other with unease. Jet, however, remained unperturbed.

"What's the worse news, then?"

Sunny sighed and looked at the silver lights of the distant city.

Was he imagining it, or were they painted ghostly green in a particular area?

He grimaced.

"It seems like the Dutchman has already made landfall. I think some of those countless living beings are currently engaged in a battle against its wraiths, out there on the outskirts of the city."

It was nice to imagine that the civilization of the Eternal City had survived, and was currently repelling the invasion of abominable specters. However, Sunny had little hope of finding a city full of ancient, enlightened immortals — things never went that way in the Dream Realm, after all, and Nightwalker had described the Eternal City as nightmarish on top of that.

So, it was most likely a situation where one horde of abominable horrors was fighting a different, even more horrifying one.

They were going to find out the truth soon enough.

There was another anomalous zone on the other side of the city, too. That one, however, was different… if the battle between the wraith fleet and the denizens of the Eternal City was expressed through a cacophony of motion — even if ghosts did not cast shadows, the beings fighting them did — that area stood out because of the total lack of movement.

As if every living being there had already been obliterated.

Sunny could only sense the very outer reaches of the Eternal City, so he could not say more. However, that alone was enough to make a few conclusions.

The Dutchman had arrived earlier than they, and its forces had already established a foothold within the dome. Currently, they controlled one of the outer islands and were staging a fierce attack to push deeper into the city.

Jet frowned.

"So, what do you suggest we do? Join the fray?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Facing the Dutchman is already bad enough, but facing it and a legion of unknown abominations at the same time is even worse. And

why should we? This is a large city. We can just as easily land on the other side of it and see who can conquer it faster. Then, we will have far more information and a chance to earn a territorial advantage before clashing with the Dutchman's forces."

Ideally, the wraith legion would have been wiped out by then, and they would only have to deal with the other eerie horde of horrifying abominations.

That, and the unknown being that Sunny suspected of being somewhere out there, inside the dome. The third contender, whatever that thing was — Old Tom's killer, unless it was the captain of the Dutchman who had finished the malevolent oyster off.

Sunny looked at the vast expanse of the Night Garden, then added:

"Plus, our primary goal right now is to find the wharf that can repair the Night Garden. It should be somewhere on the outer rim of the Eternal City — so let's sail around it and see. We can make further plans after securing a safe stronghold for our ship."

Suppressing a feeling of urgency, they slowly sent the Night Garden circling the Eternal City from a distance. As the living ship moved through the abyssal depths, Sunny managed to explore the fallen city a bit better.

It was strange… his shadow sense could easily pass through the aegis of the Night Garden, and it seemed to be able to penetrate the dome of the Eternal City as well. But not too far beyond the invisible barrier, his senses betrayed him, as if something else was stopping them.

"Those things inside the city… what do they look like?"

Sunny turned his head, remained silent for a few moments, and then answered Jet with a hint of uncertainty:

"I can't actually see them. I can only sense their shadows. And their shadows… well, outwardly, they seem like human shadows."

They had two legs, two arms, and one head, at least. However, there was something profoundly disturbing about the shadows of the

immortal denizens of the Eternal City. Sunny could not describe what exactly alarmed him, but he sensed a subtle, unnerving wrongness about them.

"I think I see the wharf."

Eventually, Naeve's voice distracted him from his unease.

Looking forward, Sunny saw a massive structure protruding from the dome of the Eternal City.

Before it, however…

A massive stele was forcefully thrust into the black glass just outside the invisible barrier, with a net of jagged cracks marring the smooth surface around it. Sunny did not know what strength one had to possess to actually shatter the bottom of the Stormsea, but the sigh of it made him shiver.

"What… is this?"

As the Night Garden drew closer and its light fell onto the surface of the towering stele, he could vaguely discern runes carved into its surface.

They were written on the outward side of the stele, facing the boundless expanse of the Stormsea. The script was strange, but he could still somewhat translate it.

Sunny exhaled slowly as he read the words written on the stone stele…

As he did, his eyes trembled slightly.

The runes read:

[I am Daeron, the Serpent King

Heed my warning, wanderer:

Turn back.

There is no salvation from eternity

And no respite from its bond.

Beyond this line

Lies hell.]

Chapter-2625: Titanic Wharf

Jet and the Saints of Night studied the runes, their expressions turning somber. The Spell must have provided them with a better translation than Sunny's own, but he was reasonably confident in his interpretation.

"Hell, huh?"

Bloodwave's voice did not sound enthused.

Sunny smiled.

"Well, you know how it goes for us Awakened. We always get sent into the depths of hell — only to find another, even more dreadful hell at the bottom of that one. I've been to a place or two that are way worse than the worst depiction of hell humans could come up with… you must have, too."

Bloodwave grunted in solidarity.

"Still, sounds quite ominous."

Sunny had no retort to that. He remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

"So Daeron visited the Eternal City as well…"

Naeve was looking at the towering stele with an expression that betrayed a hint of reverence. Hearing Sunny speak of Daeron, he tuned to him.

"The Serpent King was the lone Supreme of the Stormsea civilization before it was consumed by the Dream Realm. We knew very little about him until recently, actually — it was the Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel that shone a light on his eventual end. Perhaps you've heard about it?"

Sunny glanced at him and smiled.

"Yeah. I've heard a thing or two."

Naeve nodded.

"But even if we knew very little, we did discover traces of him all across the Stormsea. Most of the Citadels the House of Night used to inhabit are ruins of Daeron's fallen kingdom, after all… even if most of it had been swallowed by the depths. He is a mythical figure."

Naeve paused for a moment and added in a quiet tone:

"So, it feels strange to stand where he once stood, looking at the runes he personally carved into stone."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

He felt strange, as well, but for a different reason. To him, finding a message left by Daeron of the Twilight Sea felt like meeting an old friend.

"Do you think he came to the Eternal City once to claim the lineage of Storm God?"

Naeve hesitated.

"I am not sure. If he did… it did not help him and his people, in the end."

Sunny sighed.

He studied the great stele some more, then said suddenly:

"I met Daeron once, you know."

Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether turned to him in shock. Jet raised an eyebrow, too.

Sunny smiled.

"He was… a tough bastard."

One of the toughest Sunny had ever met, in fact. His soul still trembled in the throes of phantom pain at the memory of the Serpent King's sharp fangs.

Sunny had met the Nightmare version of Daeron of the Twilight Sea and killed him. Then, he received a blossom from Wind Flower, Daeron's daughter… her farewell gift.

'If Daeron felt it necessary to leave a warning here, this place must be really bad.'

Which meant that Sunny needed to change his plans a little.

As the Saints of Night stared at him silently, he turned to Jet.

"The wharf is empty, so it is safe to dock the Night Garden there. I will scout ahead."

With that, he stepped into the shadows and vanished from the runic hall.

A moment later, ignoring Daeron's warning, Sunny appeared inside the dome protecting the Eternal City.

He respected the Serpent King a great deal, but knew that the hint of awe Daeron's name invoked in him was a vestige of the past. In the past, Sunny had been a mere Master, while Daeron had been a Supreme. He had been an obstacle of such imposing height that even the thought of overcoming it seemed impossible.

Even if Sunny did kill him, in the end, it was only because Daeron had been a pale shadow of his former self, and half-dead from battling other ancient horrors on top of that.

But that was the past.

Now, Sunny was a Sovereign himself. In fact, he accomplished more than Daeron had managed… he made it further. He and his cohort conquered the Great River, at least, and while Daeron had seen no hope for his realm except to lead his people into the Tomb of Ariel as one last desperate gamble, Sunny and Nephis were steadily preparing to face the looming calamities on the battlefield.

They had a good chance of making it to the very end, as well.

They were stronger. And their people, the children of War, were stronger than the children of Storm had been, as well.

So, Daeron had not necessarily known better than Sunny, and his advice was not necessarily implacable.

'Ah… maybe he was right, though?'

As soon as Sunny appeared within the dome of the Eternal City, he was overwhelmed by an ominous feeling — as well as a far more mundane feeling of discomfort caused by the fact that the air here was thin and cold, making him feel like he was suffocating.

Grimacing, Sunny looked around.

'Something is telling me... that dying in the Eternal City is a very, very bad idea.'

There had to be a reason why Daeron had warned those trying to enter the drowned city to fear eternity.

The wharf worthy of accepting the Night Garden was similarly titanic, spanning more than a dozen kilometers in length and half as much in width, with walls that were as tall as mountains… literally. At first glance, Sunny judged that they were at least three kilometers high, partially submerged in water.

The water surprised him, actually. He would have thought that the dome would prevent it from flowing into the Eternal City entirely, but strangely enough, while the invisible barrier prevented the unfathomable mass of the sea from plummeting at the city from above, some of it did cover the black glass.

The water seethed and swirled, flowing as it glistened in the silver light of the magnificent spires.

The main structure of the wharf surrounded a horseshoe-shaped berth, with gargantuan gates facing the vast expanse of the Stormsea. The gates were currently open, and the berth was partially filled with water.

The walls of the wharf were built from stone, but inside, it was constructed out of wood. Everything around him was spotless and in pristine condition, with not a sign of wear in sight.

In fact, that was one of the reasons why Sunny felt so unnerved. He had not realized it before, but the world was supposed to show signs of the ruthless passage of time and display subtle imperfections. Even in the most well-maintained places, there were small flaws — scuffs, scratches, faded colors…

But everything in the Eternal City seemed brand new and absolutely spotless. That alone was enough to make his skin crawl, as if the world around him was not real.

The dissonance was eerie.

Not paying attention to the bridge connecting the wharf to the city just yet, Sunny concentrated on the interior of the colossal structure itself. Just as he had perceived before, it was entirely empty, with no movement and no living shadows anywhere in sight — or hidden from view.

'That's… good, I guess.'

As Sunny turned to face the brilliant lights of the Eternal City, the bow of the Night Garden pierced the veil of the invisible barrier behind him.

...After thousands of years, the living ship returned to the place where it had been born.

Chapter-2626: Ship's Cradle

As the Night Garden passed through the invisible barrier, it continued to glide across the turbulent waters that covered the infinite expanse of black glass. Great waves rose as its immense mass displaced countless tons of water, crashing into the towering walls of the wharf and escaping into the wide canals of the Eternal City.

Standing at the edge of the titanic structure's open gate, Sunny observed the fury of the elements in silence. The living ship slowly drew closer — as it did, the wharf, which had seemed improbably enormous before, suddenly did not feel so big anymore.

Sunny saw the branches of the trees that grew on the surface decks of the Night Garden sway as it passed him, slowly entering the awaiting berth.

He could not help but feel amazed at the precision with which Jet had steered the wide breadth of the titanic ship into the gate of the great wharf — there was barely a few dozen meters between the tall sides of the Night Garden and the walls of the berth, and that gap seemed minuscule in comparison to its gargantuan size.

The ship continued to sail past him for a long while as it entered the wharf, seemingly endless. Eventually, however, Sunny saw the stern of the Night Garden — which meant that many kilometers away, its bow had reached the end of the horseshoe-shaped berth, resting against its barrier.

Finally, the living ship came to a halt, swaying gently on the tumultuous currents of water.

'What now?'

They had intended to find a way to repair the Night Garden here, but the Great Citadel did not exactly come with an instruction manual —

let alone the wharf where the Demon of Repose had built her ship once, thousands of years ago.

Sunny did not have to worry, though.

Soon after the Night Garden came to a rest inside the colossal berth… the wharf came alive.

Others might have just felt a strange, almost palpable energy permeate the air, but Sunny could sense far more. In his eyes, which could peer into the nature of things, the titanic structure lit up like a radiant star.

That was because an impossible amount of soul essence was flowing through it, the raging currents infusing every centimeter of the stone walls and the wooden scaffolds with a daunting, exuberant vitality. Various areas of the wharf slowly awakened from their long slumber, igniting with shimmering light.

'Wow.'

Sunny sensed the ground beneath him tremble. Then, the vast vertical plain of the gargantuan gate he was standing on began to move with a powerful shudder — at the same time, the other side of the gate moved, as well.

Seemingly slowly because of its prodigious size, but breathtakingly fast in reality, the gates of the wharf closed. Sunny, who had unwittingly caught a ride on one of its wings, barely managed to keep his balance when the two sides shut with a deafening thunderclap, cutting out the Night Garden's path of retreat.

…Of course, if there was a need to make an escape, the titanic ship could simply ram the gates with the indestructible immensity of its stern, causing mayhem and devastation on an unimaginable scale. But Sunny hoped that it would not come to that.

Nothing happened for a minute or two — outwardly, at least.

Then, Sunny heard the roaring rustle of flowing water echoing between the sides of the living ship and the walls of its berth.

That was the turbulent water inside the wharf draining away through invisible channels. Its level slowly dropped, and the Night Garden lowered with it.

Sunny had expected some mechanism to catch and secure it in place. And there was indeed a mechanism… of sorts.

As he watched in wonder, the wooden interior of the colossal wharf blossomed with numerous flowers and leaves. Then, enormous branches stretched outward, gently catching the Night Garden and fusing with its hull.

Soon enough, the water was entirely gone, revealing the floor of the berth. The Night Garden was resting on it, supported by the colossal branches that prevented it from tilting to the side... like a tree that returned to the forest.

The branches, however, were not there simply for support.

As Sunny watched, his eyes widening a little, the powerful currents of soul essence he had observed before flowed through them into the living ship, nourishing it. There seemed to be some kind of sorcery at work, guiding them in fleeting patterns and dictating what effect they had on the weathered expanse of the Night Garden.

The wharf was not merely replenishing its reserves of essence. Under its nurturing influence, the scars marring the hull of the living ship began to close, and countless damaged parts hidden in its cavernous interior began to be mended.

Although Sunny could not perceive it, he was sure that the process of restoration and rejuvenation was happening to the mystical part of the Night Garden, too — the very sorcery that made it function.

So, in the end, he and his companions did not have to learn how to operate the wharf of the Eternal City, or what to do to repair the living ship. Just like the Night Garden, the wharf itself was a living thing — and so, it could mend the titanic vessel all by itself.

The process would probably take quite a while to complete… but it was having an effect already.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'That's one thing I don't need to worry about anymore.'

In fact, the restoration of the Night Garden alone was enough to make this expedition worth it. It was one of the few Great Citadels of humanity, after all, and one that offered the Human Domain a unique and vital advantage, not to mention serving as home for millions of people.

But, of course…

Sunny was not going to be satisfied with just that.

As the process of restoration began, his gaze left the vast expanse of the Night Garden and traveled to the far side of the wharf, where a bridge connecting it to the rest of the Eternal City was hidden.

Somewhere out there, the Dutchman was already leading its army of wraiths to conquer the sunken city. The mysterious third contender was on the move, as well.

The lineage of Storm God waited to be claimed.

…The fragment of Weaver's forbidden lineage did, as well.

And countless treasures of the immortal abode on top of that.

Exhaling slowly, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment and smiled.

"Let's conquer hell, then."

He paused for a few moments, then added in a less solemn tone:

"Uh… one more hell, I mean."

Chapter-2627: Runic Array

By the time Sunny reached the other side of the blossoming berth, Jet was already there, clad in her fitting black armor and leaning on her scythe. Her icy cold eyes peered at the long bridge connecting the wharf to the Eternal City, radiating a sense of deadly cold.

Sunny appeared out of the shadows next to her, looking in the same direction.

"Where are Naeve, Aether, and Bloodwave?"

She glanced at him briefly.

"Guarding the ship. We stationed all available Awakened throughout the interior, with Masters spread out to defend the key areas. The Saints are protecting the surface decks — Aether is on the bridge, Naeve is at the bow, while Bloodwave is on the stern. The three of them should be able to contend against anything that might get past us… or at least stall it long enough for you to arrive."

Sunny nodded, burning a bit of his essence to substitute the lacking oxygen with it.

"How is their breathing?"

Jet smiled faintly.

"They are fine while aboard the Night Garden. Beyond its aegis… they'll probably suffocate. However, these are Saints of Night we are talking about — they have Memories to deal with the lack of breathing air in spades. So you don't have to worry about them."

Sunny studied her for a moment.

"What about you?"

Jet gave him a stare.

"I am dead. What do I need air for?"

Sunny coughed.

Jet usually breathed like any normal human — when she was not low on essence, at least — and her body metabolized oxygen like any other body would. However, it seemed that her special constitution gave her an alternative, just like Sunny's Supreme Rank did.

There was enough oxygen in the air around them to speak normally, at least. That was a pleasant surprise.

She raised an eyebrow.

"So, what's the plan?"

Sunny studied the bridge for a while, then pointed to a barely visible area of rippling air on the other side of it.

"Do you see that? Let's take a look first, then decide what our next steps will be."

Summoning the Jade Mantle, he reached into the shadows and pulled a black odachi out of it. Then, placing its blade on his shoulder, Sunny walked toward the Eternal City with confident steps.

Jet followed.

As they walked across the long bridge, black water reeled and raged below them, glistening with the reflections of the silver light.

It was still eerily quiet and peaceful around them, though, with no movement whatsoever. Sunny had expected to be carving a path through a sea of abominations by now, but surprisingly enough, nothing had attacked them yet.

His shadow sense also had no trouble enveloping everything around him… up to the end of the bridge, that was. There, his perception grew vague and muddied, as if something was suppressing it.

'Strange…'

Sunny frowned.

"What is that?"

At some point, the smooth stone surface beneath their feet became uneven. Crouching, he wiped away droplets of water and studied it closely.

Thin lines were carved into the bridge, following a strange pattern. After inspecting them for a while, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"A… runic array?"

Indeed, there were countless runes carved into the stone bridge, forming a complicated enchantment. Sunny was not as knowledgeable about runic sorcery as Cassie was, but he did know the basics. There was no need to test his modest mastery, though, since he could simply ask the master.

[Cassie?]

They continued on their way, observing the endless weave of mysterious runes. Eventually, Cassie saw enough to offer her opinion:

[This is an auxiliary enchantment… way beyond what I could accomplish, but still only a small part of a larger array.]

Sunny tilted his head a little.

[What does it do?]

There was a long pause, and then Cassie's voice resounded in his mind. It was quiet and distorted, as if reaching him from a great distance, but still discernible.

[It maintains the existence of these runes, as well as of the main enchantment that is situated somewhere else. Well… rather, it prevents the innate sorcery of the Eternal City from erasing the runes by restoring the surfaces they are carved into to a pristine condition.]

Sunny narrowed his eyes.

[What does the main enchantment do, then?]

Cassie's quiet, melodious laughter resounded in his head.

[That I do not know. I would have to read it first, wouldn't I?]

Sunny sighed.

By then, they had almost reached the end of the bridge. Stopping, he remained motionless for a bit and then raised his head to study the anomaly they had noticed from the walls of the wharf.

Jet let out a whistle.

"I'll be damned."

Sunny tended to agree.

There, in front of them, a subtle rippling of the air betrayed the existence of an invisible barrier…

There was another dome inside the aegis protecting the Eternal City, covering most of the city. It was very much like the shadow dome he had created to see if the Night Garden could submerge into the water — almost as vast as the primary one, but not quite, acting as a second layer of protection.

Here, the foundation of the Eternal City was exposed, towering above the restless waters as dark cliffs. And on those cliffs… enormous runes were carved into the stone, extending in both directions as far as the eye could see.

Almost as if they encircled the entire city.

There was something quite familiar about how those runes were carved into the base of the Eternal City, as well…

The way they looked was almost exactly the same as Daeron's message on the great stele looked, only on a much larger scale.

[This is the main enchantment. I think I know what its purpose is…]

Sunny remained silent for a long while, looking at the rippling barrier of the secondary dome.

He smiled darkly.

"I think I know, as well."

Jet gave him a questioning look.

Looking up at the endless mass of water looming over their heads, Sunny said:

"The first barrier is created by innate sorcery of the Eternal City… divine sorcery of the Demon of Repose. Its purpose is to keep things out."

Then, he looked down at the great runes carved into the ancient stone.

"The second barrier is a complicated runic array — much like the runic array that protected Twilight. It was created by the Serpent King."

His expression darkened.

"And its purpose… is to keep things in."

Chapter-2628: A Warm Welcome

Jet studied the wall of subtly rippling air in front of them and the pristine streets beyond it, then rested her scythe on her shoulders in a relaxed pose.

"Well, that explains why nothing has attacked us yet."

She approached the barrier created by the Serpent King, stopping only a few centimeters away from it, then took a few steps along its nearly invisible surface.

"Seems like he was really wary of what hides inside this city, huh?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I guess."

Jet remained silent for a few moments, then asked in a calm tone:

"More importantly, if this barrier prevents things from escaping the Eternal City… wouldn't we get trapped if we pass through it, as well?"

That was what Sunny was thinking about, too.

He frowned.

"Nightwalker escaped it before, so there must be a way. Or maybe a condition sorting those who can leave, and those who can't."

He sighed and shook his head.

"It does not matter, anyway. Anything that Daeron created, I can destroy. It might take some time, though, if we do need to destroy this barrier in order to escape… not to mention that I would not feel right getting rid of it before whatever he was wary of is dealt with, or

at least contained in some way."

Jet looked at him with dark amusement.

"Oh? What makes you so confident in your ability?"

Sunny simply shrugged.

"The fact that destroying something is always easier than creating it."

Both Daeron and Sunny were Supreme, and both were powerful sorcerers. So, with all other things being equal, he was confident in his ability to dismantle the runic array Daeron had created — given time.

Jet looked back at the invisible barrier.

"I guess we are going inside, then."

Sunny grimaced.

"Well, yes. But first, we might want to… w—wait, what are you doing?!"

Before he could even finish the sentence, Jet took a step forward and passed through the barrier. Then, she turned around and looked at him with a smile.

"What?"

Sunny stared at her, aghast.

"What do you mean, what?! How could you just go and enter a mysterious magic barrier designed to trap living beings for all eternity?!"

She shrugged.

"Didn't you say that you can easily destroy it?"

Sunny suppressed the impulse to grab his head.

"I say a lot of things!"

She laughed.

"That you do."

She fell silent, studied the surrounding buildings for a few moments, then sighed and took a step back.

Sunny tensed, but Jet seemed to pass through the barrier and return to the bridge with no issue.

Still resting her arms on the shaft of the scythe, she rolled her shoulders and shook her head.

"My guess would be that the Serpent King was unwilling to let the immortals who had populated the Eternal City escape into the Twilight Sea. After all, there is no worse combination than immortality and Corruption. So, this barrier probably prevents anything that died and was restored by the city from leaving its boundary."

Sunny took a few deep breaths.

"...What if your theory turned out to be wrong?"

Jet shrugged.

"Then I would have asked you to get me out. Better yet, I'd ask Naeve to aim those scary cannons you so graciously crafted for me at the runes carved into the foundation of this place and blast a few dozen of them off the face of the earth. I am pretty sure that would have dealt with this runic array, too."

Sunny sighed.

"...I guess that works."

With that, he walked past Jet and entered the barrier, too. As he passed it, an unpleasant feeling momentarily overwhelmed his senses — it was as if something cold and unfeeling was inspecting the depths of his being, searching for an unknown sign.

Then, it brushed against Weaver's lineage and recoiled, retreating in

fright.

Sunny found himself standing near the mouth of a wide street. On both sides of him, ornate buildings rose into the darkness, with black water glistening with reflections of silver light as it rolled above him where the sky was supposed to be.

The street was clean and empty, with beautiful sculptures lining the facades of the nearest buildings.

Jet crossed the barrier for the second time and looked around.

"It doesn't seem so bad, actually."

Sunny took a few steps forward, then frowned and looked at the entrance of one of the buildings.

His shadow sense was still somewhat suppressed, but he could feel a presence there.

"Come out."

There were a few moments of silence, and then he heard the sound of light steps.

A young man walked out of the buildings, walking toward them unhurriedly. At first glance, he was just barely past the age when one would become a Sleeper, wearing a free tunic woven out of flowing, luxurious fabric. His features were soft and harmonious, beautiful enough to mistake him for a Saint, and his glistening hair was held in place by an exquisitely decorated band of silver.

He did not seem armed, and a faint smile was playing on his lips. Walking to the middle of the street, the beautiful youth stopped and turned, looking at them with a strange, curious expression.

Jet quietly removed her scythe from her shoulders, grasping it tightly.

"Oh, hell…"

Sunny almost took a step back.

Because when he peered into the soul of the striking young man, what met him… was a vast ocean of vile, boundless darkness.

The youth opened his mouth, as if wishing to welcome them to the Eternal City…

What escaped his mouth, however, were no words.

Instead, it was an avalanche of grotesque, pulsating, hungry flesh.

A dozen long tendrils ending with sharp spikes shot toward Sunny with such speed that he barely had time to react. Still, he managed to put his odachi in the path — only to feel it shatter from the impact, not offering the fleshy tendrils any resistance.

A split second later, the spikes were about to pierce his head.

Sunny dissolved into shadows, leaving them whipping furiously through the air. The stone plates of the wide street exploded into a hurricane of sharp shards, and the nearest facade collapsed into a cloud of dust when one of the tendrils brushed against it in passing.

Jet's scythe flashed, severing another. She moved with graceful ease, dodging the deadly attack by a hair's breadth.

In the next moment, Sunny stepped from the shadows behind the monstrous youth and calmly beheaded him with the reformed blade of his odachi. Red blood spluttered on the stone rubble, and the corpse of the young man fell to his knees while his head rolled a few steps, dragging the limp tentacles behind it.

"...Curses."

Sunny watched as the headless corpse slowly toppled to the ground.

Jet did not relax, glancing at him briefly.

"What's with that expression?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"It's because…"

There was no new shade in his Soul Sea.

"...I don't think that thing is dead."

Just as he said those words, the headless body stirred and floated into an upright position.

The grotesque tendrils protruding from the mouth of the severed head, meanwhile, twitched and moved, raising it a dozen meters above the ground like long, abominable legs.

The youth's eyes peered at Sunny with the same innocent, mild curiosity.

He shivered.

'Damnation…'

Chapter-2629: Corrupted Immortal

There were deadly beings out there, in the dreadful reaches of the ruthless and broken world… and then there was the Lord of Shadows, Sunless — the Sovereign of Death.

Among those who were just one step behind him, Soul Reaper Jet was perhaps the most lethal. She was definitely the most feared, and for a good reason. Few could survive her insidious Aspect and deathly resolve.

So, it was no exaggeration to say that when the two of them decided to fight side by side, there was hardly a more deadly duo than the Lord of Shadows and Soul Reaper.

…And yet, they failed to kill the eerie abomination that had welcomed them to the Eternal City.

The battle was swift, but furious. Several blocks of the sunken city had been reduced to rubble as Sunny and Jet fought the monstrous youth… or, rather, the grotesque abomination that wore the exquisite face of a human youth. The ancient buildings toppled, and the stone canvas of the roads exploded into an avalanche of jagged shards.

The silence of the empty streets was vanquished by the roaring clamor of a terrifying battle, and the beautiful landscape of the ancient city was replaced by a scene of total devastation.

'Curse it.'

Sunny dashed back, barely evading another fleshy tentacle. The breathtaking statue he had hidden behind was split in two, severed by the spike at the end of the tendril so cleanly that the cut seemed like no more than a thin crack for a few moments.

"This… is a bit tough…"

Jet had spun her ghostly scythe, slicing several tendrils, then allowed the Mist Blade to assume the form of a graceful lucerne and used its long spike to pin the nearest severed tentacle to the cobblestones. It was just in time — despite being separated from the main body of the abomination, the fleshy tentacles continued to move, trying to slither across the rubble toward her.

"What the hell do we do?"

Sunny cursed again.

The eldritch horror was strong — about as strong as a Great Beast would be, making it a walking calamity. Even a Supreme like him had to stay alert in a battle with this thing, so it was understandable that Jet was struggling.

However, that was no reason for them to be having so much trouble dealing with the grotesque abomination. Sunny could slay a Great Beast in a heartbeat, and Jet was more than formidable enough to bridge the gap between the Ranks.

By all accounts, the eerie creature should have been dead by now.

And in fact, they had already killed it many times…

It was just that the grotesque abomination refused to stay dead.

Sunny and Jet had cut, pierced, and crushed its body. They dealt fatal damage to its soul and poisoned it with the Death Will. The creature was burned to death and shattered after being frozen solid.

But no matter what they did, the beautiful youth was restored to his original appearance before too long. Its crushed, severed, burned, shattered body returned to a flawless state, and then turned hideous and horrid once again as it swelled with malformed flesh and burst into a slithering forest of deadly tendrils.

It did not take a wise man to realize what was happening.

'Damn... that damn daemon!'

The fiend they were fighting was powerful, but in and of itself, it was not too terrifying. As evidence, Sunny and Jet were still unscathed despite battling it for several minutes already. The problem, however, was that it was immortal — or rather, that the Eternal City made it immortal.

The distinction was subtle, but important.

The incredible, inexhaustible vitality that the monstrous youth possessed was not his own power. Rather, it was the manifestation of the sorcery that governed this cursed place — and so, killing him was not a matter of overpowering a Great Beast.

It was a matter of overcoming the sorcery of a daemon, and while Sunny had a high opinion of his prowess, that was not a feat that he could accomplish just yet.

How did one fight an immortal abomination, then?

Dodging another explosion of hungry flesh, Sunny could not help but smile darkly.

'No, but it's quite ironic, isn't it?'

Two dead warriors were trying to kill an undying monster.

Brandishing his black odachi, he called out to Jet:

"We can't kill it!"

His gaze landed on the shambling, appalling figure of the corrupted immortal.

"So, let's subdue it instead!"

He lunged forward, turning into a torrent of shadows to evade the whipping tendrils, and manifested into a corporeal form right in front of the abomination. His odachi flashed, severing the creature's arms — at the same time, a current of mist coalesced into a lithe figure behind the immortal, and Jet used her scythe to cut his legs.

As the fiend fell to the ground, dozens of black chains burst from it

and wrapped themselves around him. Individually, none of them were strong enough to bind him, but all together, they held long enough for more chains to descend on the struggling form and bury it under the mass of inky-black metal.

Soon, there was nothing but a small hill of black links towering where the horrid youth once stood, trembling slightly like a macabre cocoon.

Sunny stared at it somberly.

A large swath of the Eternal City around them was entirely decimated…

But the ornate buildings were already restoring themselves, too.

Shattered statues coalesced into their original, elegant forms. Toppled pillars rose from the rubble and assembled themselves. The rubble floated into the air and returned to its previous shape.

The buildings grew from the devastated ruin like flowers, and the paving of the street smoothed itself out.

Before too long, Sunny and Jet found themselves standing on a beautiful plaza. Their surroundings were spotless and undamaged, with only the cocoon of black chains and their heavy breathing proving that the battle had happened.

Jet stared at the small hill of chains and then looked at Sunny with a somber expression.

"Hey."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She pointed to the black cocoon with the blade of her war scythe.

"That was just one of them, right?"

Sunny nodded slowly, prompting her to give him a dark smile.

"...And you said that there were thousands, or maybe even millions of these things within the city?"

He hesitated for a few moments, suppressing a shiver.

What could he say?

Sunny sighed.

"Sounds about right…"

As the person who had invited Jet to this nightmarish place, he was starting to feel a tiny bit guilty.

Chapter-2630: This Much

Sunny did not want to admit it, but he was troubled.

The battle had been intense, and the enemy was powerful… but that was not the reason for his unease.

The fact that the abomination had turned out to be immortal wasn't, either.

Even the knowledge that there was a vast horde of these undying fiends populating the Eternal City was not the reason why he felt so somber.

No…

The real reason why Sunny was troubled was that he could not make sense of the monstrous youth.

There was something quite strange about this Nightmare Creature, to the point that he was not even sure if he was correct to call it one.

First, Sunny did not see what he usually saw when peering into the souls of abominations — there was the vile darkness of Corruption, true, but it did not possess the usual nodes that served as sources of the spreading, tumorous infection. So, he could not even guess the Class of the creature, only tell that it was roughly of the Great Rank.

Second, even Cassie could not tell what the horrid fiend was. All she could say after peering at its essence was a few cryptic words:

[It is… like a part of a greater whole hiding inside an usurped vessel.]

Then, after falling silent for a while, she added in a hesitant tone:

[But the greater whole it is a part of is itself incomplete, longing to

be mended.]

The fact that Cassie's Dormant Ability could not draw knowledge about the eldritch horror was already a cause for concern. Her words describing what little she did glimpse were even more worrisome.

'A part of a greater whole, usurped vessel, incomplete…'

What the hell did it mean?

And what the hell was the corrupted immortal, really?

Sunny sighed.

The cocoon of black chains continued to stir subtly, since the horrid fiend was still struggling to break free. Sunny could keep it bound without too much trouble… but he could only do so by maintaining the manifested shadows personally. Making the chains permanent would weaken them, which would allow the monstrous youth to escape.

Which meant that while he could contain this particular abomination — or maybe even a thousand of them — he could not contain them all. He could not even contain most of them, which was a problem.

He grimaced and looked at the black underside of the rolling sea above them, with silver light reflecting from its restless surface.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that this was a kind of black sky, as well.

"Ah… this is going to be quite a spectacle."

Jet wore a somber expression, her icy gaze hiding a hint of some dark emotion.

She lingered for a while, glanced at her scythe briefly, and then said in a neutral tone:

"We can still retreat, you know."

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"No. There's nowhere to retreat."

He looked away from the pile of black chains and turned to her.

"It might seem like we can escape to safer waters, but that is an illusion. There is nowhere safe in this world… in two worlds, even. Anywhere and everywhere can and will turn into a worse hell. All of existence is a warzone, so if we can't deal even with this much, then what's the point of seeking safety somewhere else?"

Jet let out a hollow chuckle.

"This much is a city full of immortal Great Ones, though. With an army of wraiths added as a free bonus. So what are we going to do?"

Sunny studied her for a while, then smiled darkly.

"For now… I suggest you take a few steps back."

Jet frowned.

"Why? What are you going to do?"

Sunny looked around, noting that he could not see the wharf from behind the tall buildings.

"Let me show you. This should be far enough, I think."

Saying that, he reached into his soul…

And summoned something.

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Not long before that, Aiko made her way to the throne room of the Dark Castle, carrying the latest report. Her boss was lounging on his throne, as usual, looking into the distance with an amused expression.

She yawned, then belatedly covered her mouth with her dainty hand.

At the moment, Aiko really missed her opulent bedroom on the highest floor of the castle.

"Hey, boss. About our investigation into the strange trends on the Black Market…"

He waved his hand lazily, interrupting her, and then looked at her with a sly smile.

'Uh-oh.'

Suddenly, Aiko had a very, very bad feeling.

Sunny seemed inordinately happy. Why was he so happy?!

"Hey, Aiko. Let me ask you a question. How would you go about conquering a city full of immortal Nightmare Creatures?"

She frowned.

"I wouldn't. I'd turn around and run away. No, actually, I would never end up anywhere near such a dreadful place, to begin with. Only a complete, irremediable idiot would. No, really."

Her boss blinked a few times with an offended expression on his pale face.

"Hey! That's harsh!"

Aiko suppressed the desire to palm her face.

"Wait, that was not a hypothetical question? What the… where the hell did you find a city full of immortal abominations?! And why?! Why would you do something like that?!"

Sunny raised his chin.

"No, it wasn't. Under the sea. And… why, because there's treasure involved!"

Aiko was about to say more, but froze instead.

A moment later, her eyes glistened.

Her expression changed subtly.

"Treasure? Huh. What kind of…"

But her boss shook his head.

"Nope. Since you're apparently full of prejudice against immortal abominations, I am not taking you with me. Not a chance. Don't even ask!"

She just stared at him for a moment.

"I wasn't going to, though?"

Her boss nodded.

"Great. Then… if you really don't want to go, I suggest you vacate the premises. Fast."

Aiko stared at him in confusion.

At that moment, something eerie happened.

Three more versions of Sunny appeared from the shadows behind her, walking toward the throne.

"And I mean really fast."

"Immediately would be best."

"You can set up a temporary office in the Nameless Temple. There's a cot in the inner sanctum, I think? Oh, and don't forget to water my tree!"

'This is bad…'

The various incarnations of her boss very rarely gathered in one place.

And every time they did, something terrible happened.

"Oh, no!"

Not wasting any time, Aiko dashed forward, sprinted past the throne… and jumped out of the window.

As she hovered in the lightless sky of the Forgotten Shorer, looking down at the magnificent edifice of the Dark Castle…

The castle suddenly vanished without a trace.

'Oh, no! My bedroom!'

And just a few moments later, it appeared again somewhere else.

To be precise, it appeared on an empty, pristine plaza in the Eternal City.

Jet had barely managed to take a few steps back before the black spires of the Dark Castle suddenly rose from the shadows enveloping the square.

Soon enough, a magnificent black fortress appeared out of nowhere between the ornate buildings, casting a deep shadow upon them.

Then, its gates opened with a chilling groan…

And out of the darkness inside, a vast legion of silent shades marched onto the ancient streets.

Chapter-2631: Invading Force

Sunny pulled Jet into the shadows, bringing them both to stand on the tall walls of the Dark Castle.

Below them, an endless river of darkness was flowing out of its gates, slowly consuming the wide open expanse of the magnificent plaza. That was his Shadow Legion — every shade he had collected over the years, except for a few left to guard his Citadel in the Burned Forest and the Sacred shades he could not summon on a whim.

Men and Nightmare Creatures, united in the tranquil embrace of his deathly authority — those who came from the Forgotten Shore, the Chained Isles, from the cold reaches of Antarctica, the endless tides of the Great River, the sweltering heat of Godgrave, the ash and cinders of the Burned Forest, and many places beyond those.

All of them had come to the Eternal City now, assembling into a vast battle formation in utter silence — hundreds of thousands of dead warriors, all ready to wage war on the immortal swarm.

Some flooded the plaza below, some manned the walls of the Dark Castle. The castle itself trembled as it stirred, casting a hungry gaze at the beautiful streets beyond.

But that was not all.

From the shadows to Sunny's left, Saint rose in the fearsome glory of her black armor. From the shadows to his right, Slayer appeared like a ghost.

Far below, a towering figure forged from blackened steel and infernal flames stepped from the castle gates, the silver light of the distant spires reflecting dimly from the countless jagged blades that littered its impenetrable carapace.

A colossal serpent with onyx scales wrapped itself around one of the towers of the Dark Castle, letting out a chilling hiss that washed over the world as the war horn of Death.

A tenebrous steed with flames burning in its crimson eyes ascended the wall to stand beside its master, the ringing of its adamantine hooves echoing across the vast plaza.

And, finally…

The shadows stirred and rose, coalescing into four dark figures.

When they appeared, the light of the silver spires seemed to dim, and the abyssal darkness pressing down on the Eternal City seemed to grow even darker.

A cold wind blew across the plaza, bringing with it the promise of murder and death.

Those four had the same face as Sunny, each wielding the power of a Supreme being.

That was the Lord of Shadows and his legion — an insidious and indestructible force capable of washing over entire realms and reducing them to rubble.

Now, that force had invaded the sunken city of the Demon of Repose.

Standing by his side, Jet sighed quietly.

"Wow."

She remained motionless for a few moments, observing the plaza.

Where there had been only emptiness minutes ago now stood a fearsome castle. Beyond its walls, a vast army of silent shadows was ready for battle. The very atmosphere of the Eternal City had changed, announcing the arrival of a new, terrifying invader.

Jet studied Sunny carefully, then shook her head.

"So this is the power of a Sovereign…"

She had witnessed Nephis descend into battle, but not the Sovereign of Death. Beholding his Supreme power felt different, though — perhaps because the visible manifestation of Changing Star's power, despite its unimaginable destructiveness, was personal in nature. This, however, illustrated the essence of what a Sovereign was far more demonstrably.

A being who wielded authority as a weapon, whose influence spread over the world and subjugated multitudes…

A ruler.

It was strange to think that she was acquainted with a creature like that.

Sunny gave her a confused look.

"Oh, right. You haven't really seen me get serious, have you?"

In Jet's defense, no one had really seen the Lord of Shadow wield his Supreme power. The Shadow Legion had mostly been confined to the Burned Forest ever since Sunny became a Sovereign, and he was the only human there. Cassie must have witnessed how tyrannical his Domain was, but mostly, people had only glimpsed it during that last, fateful battle in Godgrave.

Sunny had just barely attained Supremacy back then, though, so it hardly counted as a conscious expression of his true strength.

Jet shook her head again.

"No. And, how do I put it… strangely enough, you don't give an impression of someone who wields this kind of terrifying power. To be honest, it is hard to remember that you are a Sovereign when you're around."

Sunny grinned.

"Really? Why, thank you! That is by design."

Jet raised an eyebrow, prompting him to shrug.

"Nobody said that a Sovereign has to emanate a solemn and unapproachable aura of suffocating dominance, you know? All that zeal and worship Nephis is subjected to… ugh, I find it weird. No, thank you. There's a more practical reason why I prefer to act as a fun and easygoing demigod, as well."

It was because he could not allow anyone to worship him, since doing so would bring the Forgotten God closer to awakening.

Sunny sighed.

"Oh, and by the way. There is a reason why I summoned my castle and my army now… and it's not just to make an awesome entrance."

Jet smiled faintly.

"Let me guess — it's because thousands of these corrupted immortals are already rushing at us."

Sunny was surprised.

"How did you know?"

She looked at the Shadow Legion.

"Because that is a defensive formation, and the shadows on the walls of the castle are all taking positions as if expecting a siege."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then grimaced.

"You are right. I can't sense our surroundings very well, but I do feel them approaching — more or less every abomination that has been dwelling on this particular island of the Eternal City. The first ones will arrive in under a minute, I'd say."

He glanced down at the cocoon of black chains, which was contained in the courtyard of the Dark Castle now.

"So, we have around a minute to decide how to win a battle against these things…"

Chapter-2632: Attrition

Looking at the vast army of silent shades arrayed on the plaza below them, Sunny inhaled deeply.

There wasn't much time for them to assess the situation and prepare for battle… but then again, this particular battle was merely the prelude for the frightening war that would swallow the Eternal City soon.

He exhaled.

"Actually, I am not too concerned about this first skirmish. You should probably understand why."

Jet was an experienced commander, after all — in fact, she was far more experienced than he was, in that regard. She had already been a high-ranking officer during the Southern Campaign, having commanded various government forces throughout her storied career — taking charge of the entire First Irregular Company was merely the next step.

Later, Sunny had mostly faced the perils of the Dream Realm on his own, while Jet's responsibilities grew exponentially. He did take charge of a contingent of the Sword Army in Godgrave, but that paled in comparison to her leadership experience, both civil and military. There was little difference between the two in the Age of Nightmares, anyway.

So, he could hardly find a better advisor.

She nodded.

"The Eternal City is vast, and it is separated into islands by the powerful currents of water. We have just arrived; so, the abominations we will face are merely those of them who happened to

be on this particular island when we landed."

Her expression darkened.

"The other inhabitants of the Eternal City would have already sensed our presence, though. Even if they have not, the clamor of this battle will reveal our location to them. So, we will be beset by many times more enemies before too long… and they will come at us from various directions, threatening to outflank our forces or bypass them entirely to reach the Night Garden."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"So, what do you recommend we do?"

Jet fell silent for a few moments, contemplating. Then, she said in a somber tone:

"The situation is unusual, because apart from the current rulers of the city, there is not one, but two invading forces. The terrain is difficult, as well… so, although I would have suggested that we entrench ourselves and let the enemy crush themselves into pulp against our defences, that is not an option now."

She looked into the distance, calculating.

"We will need to advance, conquer territory, and play a strategic game of cat and mouse with these creepy immortals. Most importantly, we will need to keep advancing at a sufficient rate and achieve a relatively swift victory. There are two possible outcomes if we don't, and neither of them promises a good ending for us."

Sunny's smile turned a little dark.

He nodded.

"Indeed. If the Dutchman is wiped out, the immortals who are currently tied up fighting against the wraith army will all descend upon us, doubling the already overwhelming strength of our enemies. If it is the opposite and the wraiths conquer the city, though… gods, who knows what terrible fate will befall us? They will get to all the treasures we are aiming for first, at the very least. And something

tells me that they'll also grow stronger as a result."

He glanced in the direction where a towering lighthouse was shining with radiant light, far in the distance, and sighed.

"So, this dreadful race seems to be far from over. We are still running against the clock."

It was in more senses than one, as well.

Sunny and Jet had only discussed the situation briefly, but the time afforded to them was already almost over.

"These are issues of strategy, though."

Saying those words, Jet gave him an evaluating look.

"What we need to discuss first is tactics. How do we even battle something that cannot be killed?"

That was the issue, indeed.

Sunny looked down at the black cocoon of shadow chains. He remained silent for a few moments, then said evenly:

"Actually, my shades cannot be killed, either. Not through usual means, at least — even if they are destroyed, they will eventually come back. It is just that they need some time to mend themselves. The immortals of the Eternal City take time to be revived, as well, although it seems much shorter."

His expression darkened.

"In that short moment between destruction and restoration, though, they are vulnerable — that is when we can contain them. As long as we come up with a reliable manner of containment, that is. So… at the end, it all comes down to simple math. We need to disable them faster than they vanquish my shades."

Sensing movement near the entrances to the plaza, Sunny sighed.

"Which means that there would be no decisive victory or defeat in

this conflict. Instead, it's going to be a war of attrition. What we must do is leverage our advantages and employ strategies to maximize the enemy losses while minimizing our own. Then, we will be able to conquer the Eternal City instead of being devoured by it."

Jet flexed, stretching her shoulders, and gave him an amused smile.

"That was my conclusion, as well. As for the details…"

She looked at the far side of the plaza, where a wide road and countless smaller alleys opened into it from the depths of the city.

"Well, I guess we will have to iron them out as we go."

Her tone turned a little somber — because there, in the distance, a small silhouette appeared at the mouth of a dark alley.

Then, there was another, and another, and another.

Soon enough, a crowd had gathered at the edge of the plaza — as if the citizens of the Eternal City had to come to peruse the goods of an open-air market. All of them were young and breathtakingly beautiful, wearing light and elegant garments, their smooth faces and glistening eyes betraying no sign of the hidden Corruption.

None of them was armed, either…

And yet, their placid, curious glances made Sunny shiver.

He took a deep breath and then gazed at the distant immortals coldly.

"Let's do that, then. The devil hides in the details, after all…"

Chapter-2633: Rules of Engagement

'How ironic.'

The immortals stood at the boundary of the vast plaza, their beautiful and youthful figures drowning in the stark darkness cast by the tall buildings of the Eternal City. Only their eyes glistened like cold silver stars, reflecting the light of the magnificent spires.

They seemed to be studying the Shadow Legion with curious smiles… but that was an illusion. By now, Sunny knew that their smiles were merely masks that these abominations wore to resemble humans.

There was nothing human about them, though.

Now that he could see them clearer, he noticed things that had escaped him during the frenetic battle with the fiend who had welcomed them to the city. Something moved under their supple skin from time to time, as if straining to escape, and their breathtaking faces turned monstrous for a split second now and then.

Before, Sunny had assumed that these abominations took human shape to hide their harrowing nature. But now, he realized that they looked human through no effort or will of their own.

On the contrary, the beautiful immortals were endlessly straining to become monsters. It was just that every time their bodies began to mutate into grotesque abominations, the same sorcery that granted them endless life returned their flesh to its original form.

So, they were not fiends who pretended to be humans. Instead, they were monsters trapped in human bodies against their will…

For all eternity.

This eerie contradiction made his skin crawl, and considering that the skin of these fallen immortals literally crawled, that only disturbed Sunny more.

While it seemed like the beautiful youths were observing the Shadow Legion with curiosity, in fact, they were simply waiting for more of them to arrive.

A few figures turned into a crowd, and a crowd turned into a swarm.

The swarm flowed onto the plaza like a tide.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

'Here we go.'

His mind spun like a wheel.

What was the best way to fight these monsters? How could he achieve victory, and do it in a way that was the most beneficial for him and the Shadow Legion?

Sunny considered what he needed to do for a brief moment and quickly came up with an answer.

Funnily enough, it was almost offensively simple.

At the beginning of his journey as an Awakened, Sunny had mostly relied on his skill and combat intelligence to survive. His technique, physical prowess, and state of mind had decided the outcome of battles.

Later, however, things changed. As both Sunny and his enemies grew more powerful, most of his victories were earned by his wit and his soul arsenal instead. Skill and martial prowess were still of vital importance, of course, serving as the irreplaceable foundation of everything, but he won countless battles by using obscure enchantments of inconspicuous Memories in unexpected ways.

The outcome of battles he fought these days, meanwhile, was often decided by more mystical forces. Who was stronger, whose power was more versatile? Who knew how to use it best? In the clashes of

deities, the very concepts of what they were often played the most important role.

Facing the swarm of immortal abominations, though, Sunny realized that he had made a full circle.

Since the conquest of the Eternal City would come down to a battle of attrition, Sunny had to minimize his losses. And to minimize his losses, he had to adhere to a wholly primitive set of tactical values.

There was no trick to overcoming this trial, just mundane warfare. The greatest advantage Sunny wielded was that his Shadow Legion was an organized combat force, while the fallen immortals, while dreadfully powerful, were merely a monstrous mob. So, he had to make sure that his shades fought with the skill and technique of exalted warriors, and that all of them displayed flawless cohesion.

Beyond that, the tried and tested rules of military strategy would be of utmost importance. He had to prevent the enemy from flanking his army, for example, and use terrain to his advantage. Whenever possible, he would have to reduce his losses by building or usurping fortifications. Even the simplest elements of warfare, like battle formations, would once again become vital.

It was a far cry from the conceptual battles and clashes of opposing Aspects… but it was also familiar territory.

So, Sunny was able to adjust his mentality swiftly.

There were mere moments left before the fallen immortals descended on the battle formation of the Shadow Legion…

And in those few moments, Sunny made a decision.

With the nature of the battle for the Eternal City being what it is, his ability to finely control each of his shades was more important than ever. He had already achieved great success in that regard thanks to Mind Weave, but even that was not enough.

So, taking a deep breath, he summoned one more shade.

The Rat King was resting in the lightless expanse of his soul now…

which meant that Sunny could call upon a different Sacred shadow.

As the fallen immortals rushed forward, their bodies rippling and bursting into torrents of eviscerating flesh, a colossal silhouette appeared above the plaza.

Then, a titanic black moth opened its vast wings, perched atop the main tower of the Dark Castle and looming over its walls.

Sunny had summoned the shadow of Puppeteer Moth, the Spirit of Doubt.

As it regarded the plaza with its enormous black eyes, countless strands of ethereal black silk shot forward, spreading through the air like a spiderweb — so thin as to almost be invisible.

Each of those strings buried itself in the back of a shade, connecting them all to the Puppeteer.

At the same time, one of Sunny's incarnations turned into a shadow and wrapped itself around the Sacred shade, sharing its senses.

'Aaah…'

Sunny shuddered, overwhelmed by the feeling of fusing with the shadow of a Sacred being. It was too strange, too vast, too great for him to fathom fully…

But he did fathom the connection between the Puppeteer and the soldiers of the Shadow Legion.

Like that, Sunny gained nearly flawless control of his undying army.

Chapter-2634: Gathering Data

The flood of slithering, hungry flesh collided with the vanguard of the Shadow Legion.

A vast swath of the beautiful plaza exploded into a cloud of stone shards, then was restored to pristine condition, then was destroyed again.

The fallen immortals each possessed the power of a Great One, bending the very fabric of the world with their profane will. However, the enemies they faced were not weak, either — there, at the forefront of the great battle formation, the shades of the Black Millipedes and the Ember Queen flowed forward like a dark tide, unleashing their fury upon the abominable fiends.

The millipedes were connected to the Puppeteer through the ethereal strands of black silk, and through the Puppeteer to Sunny.

Suddenly, he could sense and command numerous monstrous, segmented bodies. Sunny had a myriad of sharp legs and a myriad of even sharper mandibles, using them to rip and tear the flesh of the immortal swarm to shreds.

The prisoners of the Eternal City were unmade, and then restored once again.

Countless shades were vanquished, returning into the dark embrace of his soul.

A moment later, the tide of millipedes rippled and changed its behavior. Instead of flowing forward like a tide of chilling, bestial fury, the millipede formed an unbreakable wall from their glossy black chitin. Those of them who had been cast by beings of higher Classes rose above that wall, spitting torrents of corrosive black acid at the advancing immortals…

For a few moments, the plaza was drowned by acrid smoke.

Then, segments of the chitin wall were breached or torn apart, and the carnage continued.

Sunny observed the battle through countless eyes — and through his own four pairs of them, as well.

"I've noticed something peculiar."

Jet's voice was strangely calm despite the terrifying spectacle happening in front of them.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She looked around. Her gaze lingered on Saint, Slayer, Nightmare, the gargantuan shape of Serpent wrapped around one of the Dark Castle's towers, and the lumbering figure of Fiend far below.

"You seem to be holding back."

Sunny forced out a smile.

"I need to establish a baseline to know how fast my shades can be destroyed by these things. Once I know that, I will know how to plan for future battles better."

She frowned slightly.

"Are the losses you are suffering worth it?"

He grimaced.

"That is something I need to find out, as well."

Sunny was not going to sacrifice too many shades in pursuit of vital information, though. He was definitely not going to sacrifice the Ember Queen and her more powerful champions — so, when the wall of chitin came close to collapsing, he moved one to the next test.

Three of his incarnations stepped through the shadows and fused

with him, augmenting his power.

'Ah… feels great.'

This was the strongest he had been after the final battle at Godgrave, so Sunny almost felt like himself again. Enjoying the feeling of ferocious power running through his veins, he cast his attention to something else.

The moment four of his incarnations were reunited, four links of the Curse fused, as well. Instantly, its power soared… and his did, too.

In fact, it worked so well that Sunny was stunned for a brief moment.

'Oh. I see what is happening.'

It was the [Absence of Light] enchantment doing its work. That enchantment was supposed to grant Sunny more power when he was surrounded by deep shadows… and where would he find shadows that were deeper than those that dwelled at the bottom of the Stormsea, in the abyssal darkness that had never been touched even by an echo of sunlight?

Perhaps only in the Shadow Realm.

Spending a split second to come to terms with his immense potency, Sunny inhaled slowly, and then activated two of the three core enchantments of the Curse: [Shadow Flame] and [Mercy of Shadow].

Instantly, the augmentation he was enjoying was transferred to the champion shades of the Black Millipede tribe. At the same time, more of his deathly will was expressed through them, as well.

The cadence of the battle changed.

Far below, the rate at which his shades were being destroyed increased drastically. At the same time, the rate at which the fallen immortals were obliterated increased.

Not that it mattered much, considering that they were revived before too long.

Sunny frowned.

The effect was significant… but that was because there were relatively few of the immortal abominations on the outskirts of the Eternal City. Once they delved deeper into its streets, the scale of the battles would increase, and therefore, the impact of the Curse would become less pronounced.

But that was valuable information in and of itself, because it helped him understand what kind of engagements he had to avoid, and what kind he had to force.

Jet sighed.

"Are you done gathering information, perhaps?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments and then sighed.

"Yes. That should do, for now."

It seemed as if Slayer had been waiting to hear these exact words. A moment after Sunny spoke them, she was already drawing her bow, the tip of her arrow swelling with blinding light.

At the same time, Saint turned into a torrent of darkness and rushed toward the battle. Nightmare leaped into the air, while Serpent slithered to the ground like a river of onyx scales.

Fiend simply plummeted into the shadows, stepping through them to appear just beyond the mass of Shadow Millipedes.

He did not manage to disappear before Sunny stirred and shouted, his voice full of concern:

"Don't eat them!"

The first thing he had thought about when presented with the problem of containing the fallen immortals was feeding them to either Fiend or Mimic. However, the dwellers of the Eternal City were too eerie, too unnerving. Sunny was worried that swallowing one of these creatures would allow it to infect his Sadows.

Observing the Shadow Legion stir, Jet asked in a calm tone:

"So... are we joining the fun, as well?"

Sunny looked at her and smiled.

"Of course. We wouldn't want to miss something so memorable, would we?"

Chapter-2635: Hard Work

The silent ranks of the Shadow Legion stirred under the walls of the Dark Castle. The cadence of the battle changed as the black tide moved forward, flowing across the shattered ground. The titanic figures of Goliath and the Defiled Seeker lumbered above the black tide of dead soldiers, making the plaza shake with each step; the countless threads of ethereal black silk trembled, forming a vast spiderweb.

The fallen immortals were still engaged in a battle against the Ember Queen and her millipede swarm. Individually, each of them was more powerful than an average shade under Sunny's command… however, in this battle at least, the numerical advantage was on his side.

So, the rulers of the Eternal City swiftly found themselves flanked. Bestial shades of Godgrave had flanked them from the left, while the Shadow Wolves and the Obsidian Wasps had flanked them from the right. At the same time, the shadow of Daeron led the shades of human Saints into a frontal assault to support the Ember Queen.

Clad in the armor forged by the shadow of the King of Swords, the shadow of the King of Twilight descended upon the immortals of the Eternal City like a storm. His polearm carved a bloody path through the mass of slivering flesh, causing the thunderous roars of devastating impacts to roll across the battlefield.

It was somewhat ironic, but in this battle between Great and Supreme beings — those who were only a step away from becoming deities — the mundane laws of strategy were just as important as mystical matters.

The inhabitants of the Eternal City might have been immortals, but they still could not overcome the dire disadvantage of being attacked from the flank. Attacked from several directions at the same time, they began to falter.

A few moments later, a blinding explosion bloomed among the fallen immortals, turning hundreds of them to dust — that was Slayer's arrow finding its mark.

Fiend emerged from the shadows of the battlefield, towering above it like a steel colossus forged in the depths of hell. A plume of red flame escaped from his maw, turning a vast area in front of him into a blazing inferno, and his razor-sharp claws severed countless bodies in half.

Saint rose from a vast torrent of darkness. Despite towering more than ten meters above ground, she moved with her usual grace — the weight of her firm steps, however, was crushing enough to send cracks running through the stone plates covering the plaza.

Serpent plunged into the hideous mass of fallen immortals, rampaging among them like a formless, ever-changing spirit of death. It took whatever shape was most suitable for destroying the enemy, and remained in its own serpentine form when there was no better choice

Nightmare tore their grotesque flesh with his horns, hooves, and fangs...

Jet observed the awesome spectacle of the terrifying battle with a calm gaze. She sighed quietly and then jumped onto the parapet of the Dark Castle's rampart. The wind sent her raven-black hair dancing, and wisps of chilling mist surrounded her lithe figure.

"Have you come up with a way to actually contain these fiends yet?"

Sunny gave her a neutral look.

"...I'm working on it."

She grinned and raised a fist into the air.

"Work hard!"

With that, she turned into mist and disappeared from view, as if dispelled by the wind.

Soon enough, a terrifying wraith of icy mist appeared among the fallen immortals, severing their repulsive bodies with a ghostly scythe.

Sunny let out a satisfied sigh.

"Well then, it's time for me to go, too."

He took a few steps back, lowered his body, and then dashed forward. Racing the parapet of the battlements, he jumped and soared into the sky.

Half a dozen seconds later, Sunny plummeted to the ground like a dark comet, falling into the very middle of the immortal swarm.

His impact made the entire island quake, and a violent explosion tore everything around him to shreds. A devastating shockwave rolled outward, breaking the bodies of undying abominations and sending them to the ground. Those who were near the explosion were simply reduced to ash.

When the dust settled, there was a vast crater in the spot where Sunny had landed, surrounded by a wide, empty area. Standing in the middle of that carnage and watching calmly as the swirling flakes of ash slowly coalesced into human bodies, he smiled.

"See?! I am working on it hard!"

The helmet of the Jade Mantle hid his face, and a black shield wove itself out of shadows on his arm.

"Serpent!"

The gargantuan Shadow slithered his way and rippled, then turned into a black sword that fell into his hand.

Having suffered from how swift and deadly the flesh tendrils of a fallen immortal were, Sunny had abandoned his usual odachi in favor of a one-handed sword and a shield. He was proficient in this form of combat as well, of course, he just did not use it often.

Now that he did, however…

Sunny felt a strong and unexplainable impulse to strike the rim of his shield twice.

'I think I am starting to understand why Saint does it…'

He was surrounded by the immortal fiends by then.

Before, one of them had been enough to make Sunny sweat. Now, there were dozens of them around him — and behind them, hundreds more.

But Sunny was not the same as he had been then.

At the moment, he was augmented by three of his shadows and wielded four links of the Curse on top of that. The Jade Mantle and its [Underworld Armament] enchantment empowered the shadowbound charm, as the [Absence of Light] enchantment of the charm empowered Sunny.

The sword he wielded, meanwhile, was the manifestation of a Supreme Titan — Serpent, his slaying blade.

So, his strength had become more unfathomably ferocious, making it feel like the world was straining to contain him.

Sunny smiled.

"Come. Today, I will make you regret being immortal…"

Brandishing his sword, he lunged forward.

Chapter-2636: Containment Issue

Sunny had dismissed the Marvelous Mimic from the Forgotten Shore while four of his incarnations were inside, and then summoned it to the Eternal City. That was how five of his avatars ended up at the bottom of the Stormsea at the same time.

He called upon the Shadow Legion and summoned the Puppeteer to gain a flawless measure of control over his shades. Mind Weave allowed him to issue countless commands at the same time, so he could control all of his shades individually… but at the end of the day, he was still issuing orders.

With the great Moth controlling the shades like marionettes, though, Sunny could do more. Instead of giving endless commands to make his shades do what he wanted them to, he only needed to command one — and as long as an incarnation of his was wrapped around the Puppeteer, the entire Shadow Legion became no different from an extension of his body.

That meant that he was not limited to giving orders anymore, he could control his shades like he did his body. The cohesion of the Shadow Legion was therefore nearly flawless now, and more than that, every shade — even those of mindless beasts — could fight with the same skill and technique Sunny possessed.

Needless to say, his mastery of Shadow Dance was instrumental in controlling thousands of varied bodies skillfully.

Armed with these advantages, Sunny engaged the fallen immortals of the Eternal City in battle. Their crushing collective Will washed over him, and was repelled by his own with the help of the Curse.

But that was merely the boring part… the necessary part.

Now, however, was his time to have fun.

'No, really, what is wrong with me? Is this my idea of fun?'

Encased in the fearsome carapace of the Jade Mantle, wielding the Soul Serpent, and empowered by the Curse, Sunny plunged into the swarm of grotesque, immortal abominations.

His shield was broken under the avalanche of fleshy tendrils, but instantly restored itself as Sunny manifested more shadows into its shape.

His slaying blade cut the fallen immortals down one after another, but failed to kill them.

His armor remained unscathed, for now, both protecting his body and empowering it through the Curse.

Sunny struggled a little with not getting drunk on his fierce strength. In that moment, he truly felt like a demigod — his power had transcended the mundane, forcing the world to bend and change shape around his movements.

Of course, there was a wall standing in his way. That wall was the Will of his enemies… but while Sunny could not demolish it completely, he could overcome it enough to not feel too restrained. The Will technique he had been developing for a long while now helped him to achieve that.

So, yes… he was having fun.

The battle was a little exhilarating.

It had been a long time since he used that much of his power, and even more since he had been matched this well against an enemy. His legion was battling the mob of abominable immortals all around him, and he was barely staying alive while cutting down his foes — it was in that narrow gap between triumph and the cold defeat of death that the thrill of a battle lay.

Best of all, his enemies were immortal. So, he could kill them as many times as he wanted.

Naturally… the fact that they were immortal was also infinitely troubling.

'What exactly must I do here?'

Deflecting a lightning-fast tendril of repugnant flesh with his shield, Sunny pierced the body of a fallen immortal and sliced it apart. A split second later, he was already moving to avoid the next lethal strike while raising his sword to deliver a swift downward slash.

He was doing well in the battle against the fallen immortals, and the Shadow Legion was confidently overcoming them as well. But these were eternal beings, after all — no matter how many times they were destroyed, they would endlessly rise from the dead. If nothing changed, the scales of battle would begin to favor them soon, and eventually, they would swallow both him and his shades.

He needed to find a way to contain them.

The first idea Sunny had was to feed the undying fiends to either Fiend or Mimic. However, he was wary of that method since it could poison and destroy his Shadows… with how indestructible these abominations were, there was no telling what would happen if one of them was consumed.

Luckily, there were other potential solutions, as well.

The simplest one was to toss the fallen immortals into the Shadow Realm. After all, immortality was not an inherent trait of these fiends — it was the Eternal City that kept reviving them. So, moving them to somewhere else was supposed to solve the problem, especially if that place was the Realm of Death.

However, there were two problems with this idea. First, Sunny would have to drag every abomination into the Shadow Lantern personally, by pulling them into the shadows. Second, he was not sure that it was even possible — something told Sunny that the barrier created by Daeron would prevent the fallen immortals from leaving the Eternal City, even in that unconventional way.

'What else, then?'

He could potentially use the Puppeteer to take the immortals under control. And yet, that was not guaranteed to work, either — after all, the great Moth was merely a shadow of the Spirit of Doubt. It did not possess a Will of its own, so subjugating creatures of the Great Rank was unlikely to work. Apart from that, the Eternal City could simply return the immortals to a state prior to subjugation.

'Well, then…'

Sunny continued to fight, dividing his mind between countless shades and his own body.

There was one way that could work, even if it demanded more effort to implement.

'Yes… yes, that should do the trick.'

He smiled darkly.

Before Sunny could subdue the fallen immortals in that way, though, they had to be thoroughly defeated.

The Shadow Legion had its work cut out for it.

Chapter-2637: Immortal Creatures

A world-shaking roar thundered above the battlefield, and Sunny felt cold terror shackle his limbs like a vice. His movements slowed, and the foundation of his Will seemed to crumble.

Instantly, tendrils of flesh moved faster than lightning and shot past his defenses to pierce his limbs, jerking him in four different directions to pull his body apart.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny steeled his mind and shook off the mental attack that had weakened him… was it even a mental attack, if it affected his very spirit?... and strained his muscles.

Instead of being pulled apart, he overpowered the four immortals who were trying to quarter him into the dark embrace of shadows. There, his vast and shapeless form tore their abominable shadows apart, scattering them across the boundless darkness. A moment later, he assumed a physical shape once more, rising from the bloodied rubble with a cold expression on his hidden face.

The breached surface of the Jade Mantle was already repairing itself, and drops of crimson blood were falling from his sword.

'What was that roar?'

Casting his senses into the depths of the Eternal City, he felt a massive shadow barreling toward the plaza. Then, a second roar crashed into the Shadow Legion, and an enormous tiger with glistening silver fur and golden stripes leaped into the mass of fallen immortals, its bestial eyes shining with a beautiful glow.

In the next moment, the flesh on the back of the giant tiger rippled and bulged with repugnant growths, which then exploded into a

forest of deadly tendrils. The tendrils shot forward, piercing countless shades and ripping them apart.

Sunny's gaze turned somber.

'So, the Eternal City was not populated by immortal humans alone…'

It seemed like there had been immortal creatures here, as well, and all of them were now twisted by Corruption.

The abominable beast plunged into the battle formation of the Shadow Legion, shattering it. With every leap, the graceful figure of the silver tiger grew more monstrous and misshapen, slowly transforming it into a nightmarish mass of slithering flesh.

Before the abominations could deal too much damage, however, an enormous hand forged of blackened metal rose from the darkness and grabbed its neck, slicing it open.

As a waterfall of blood poured to the ground, Fiend emerged from the shadows, raising the giant tiger into the air — the devastating tendrils scraped against his mental carapace without being able to pierce it, and as infernal flames ignited in his eyes, wisps of smoke escaped through the tears in the abomination's fur.

Sunny focused on repairing the battle formation of the Shadow Legion, feeling a little disappointed that he could not deal with the abominable tiger himself.

Well… he could, in theory. After all, the damn thing was just as immortal as its human kin — so, all he had to do was command Fiend to retreat.

But that would be a bit too unhinged a decision, even for him.

Raising his shield, Sunny moved forward.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the Shadow Legion gained an upper hand over the disorganized mob of fallen immortals. Despite all their great power, the denizens of the Eternal City seemed more like mindless beasts than people — so, they failed to overcome the flawless cohesion and discipline of the silent shades.

Of course, their inferior numbers played the decisive role.

Eventually, Sunny gained complete control of the battlefield. The grotesque creatures were still refusing to die, but at some point, he managed to divide and isolate them from each other. Once that happened, the losses of the Shadow Legion almost ceased.

When the fallen immortals were imprisoned in a ruthless loop of being killed, reviving, and immediately being slain again, he proceeded to the next step.

The actions of the shades changed.

Instead of cutting the fallen immortals down, the Shadow Legion attempted to restrain them. At first, Sunny failed to contain many of the abominations, causing more shades to be destroyed — containing a Nightmare Creature was much harder than killing it, after all.

But eventually, he succeeded.

Using the Puppeteer and his legion of shades, Sunny slowly managed to restrain each of the corrupted immortals.

That was how the first battle he fought in the Eternal City ended.

Sunny stood among the rubble, breathing heavily. The plaza around him was completely destroyed, and all the ornate buildings around it had turned to ruins. The Dark Castle towered behind him, casting a deep shadow on the scene of utter devastation.

Soon enough, though, the plaza returned to its spotless beauty, and the ornate buildings assembled themselves from the rubble.

The black waters of the Stormsea rolled far above his head, glistening with reflected light.

Dismissing his helmet, Sunny inhaled deeply and wiped the sweat off his brow. Jet appeared in a gust of cold wind, making him shiver.

She seemed unscathed, if a little tired.

'Ah, I am worried.'

Fighting an immortal opponent was already bad enough, but it was woefully worse for Jet — after all, she needed a constant influx of soul essence to stay alive. Since they could not really kill these abominations, she could not receive any essence either. All she could do was waste it without getting anything back.

Would Jet even survive a prolonged confrontation for the Eternal City?

Sunny sighed.

Looking around, at the silent figures of shades who were struggling to hold the abominable immortals down, Jet asked in a somber tone:

"What now?"

Sunny hesitated for a short while, then answered evenly:

"Now, we show these hellspawn creatures a different, far more cruel hell."

With that, his shadows flowed off his body to the ground, and then assumed their corporeal forms. The fifth incarnation stepped out of the shadows, as well, having left the Puppeteer.

There was the sound of adamantine hooves ringing on the stone, and Nightmare approached them, blood dripping from its steel fangs.

Sunny inhaled deeply, and then looked at his steed.

"Sing them a lullaby, Nightmare."

With that, all five of Sunny's avatars turned into shadows and wrapped themselves around the black stallion.

Nightmare's crimson eyes ignited with terrifying flames.

Chapter-2638: A Maze of Dreadful Dreams

The fallen immortals of the Eternal City could not be destroyed, but they had to be contained.

So, of all the measures available to Sunny, Nightmare and his [Dream Curse] seemed like the best choice.

[Dream Curse] Ability Description: "This Shadow is a master of a lesser dream domain. It is capable of lulling living beings to sleep and imprisoning their souls in a labyrinth of nightmares. The souls destroyed within the nightmare maze feed the Shadow; the more powerful the Shadow grows, the faster and further the dream curse spreads."

It was an insidious and terrifying power, made only more eerie by how closely it resembled some traits of the Nightmare Spell. It was also what made Nightmare a Terror.

No two Terrors were alike, but there were similarities between all of them. Just like Tyrants were usually distinguished by their ability to rule lesser creatures and control territories, Terrors were distinguished by their ability to influence the world and spread. They were more akin to dreadful phenomena than singular beings, and it was that escalating nature of their influence that made them so dangerous.

Curiously enough, most Titans did not seem to possess a similar kind of spreading influence, and while some were followed by swarms of Nightmare Creatures, they did not really rule or care to rule them. The abominations were simply drawn to them like crows that followed slaughtering armies, while Titans usually regarded them with indifferent disinterest.

They were aloof and solitary creatures that seemed to exist in a world of their own. Strangely, that seemed like a downgrade compared to the vast swarms of abominable minions that served Tyrants or the exponentially expanding influence of Terrors… and yet, nobody who had ever faced a Titan on a battlefield would think them weaker than beings of a lesser Class.

The process of Terrors evolving to Tians was shrouded in mystery and largely unknown, but there was a reason why becoming a Titan was the final and most difficult step that a creature could take on the path of evolution. There was also a reason why another, less frequently used word to describe Titans was Calamities…

That said, Titans were exceedingly rare. And while Terrors were rare as well, Sunny had suffered far more while encountering the few he did meet. Some of the most dreadful foes he had ever clashed with were Terrors: the Soul Devourer, the Terror of the Crimson Spire, the Terror of LO49, Skinwalker… that odious Thieving Bird…

And Nightmare.

The [Dream Curse] could spread like a plague, both consuming his prey and making the tenebrous steed stronger. It was insidiously effective, as well, capable of subduing even creatures that were far stronger than its source — that was how Sunny had collected an army of Great Nightmare Creatures in Godgrave and dropped a Cursed Demon on Mordret's head.

Most chillingly of all, the Dream Curse was subtle. Its victims did not even know that they were under attack until they were lulled to sleep and locked in an inescapable labyrinth of nightmares — and by then, it was already too late. That was the reason why Nightmare could prey on abominations of higher Ranks than him.

Even if the Dream Curse failed to lull a creature to sleep at first, he could continue to subtly influence them until their defenses were weakened, and they could not resist anymore.

However…

There was a limit even to that insidious power, of course.

Nightmare was merely a Transcendent Terror, after all. It had taken Sunny and him close to two years to gradually assemble the swarm of Great Nightmare Creatures in Godgrave, and it had not been an easy feat either.

The fallen immortals from this district of the Eternal City alone were greater in number than those abominations, and each of them was ferociously powerful. There would be many more before the expedition was over, and Sunny did not have years to slowly subdue them all… so, he was not entirely confident that Nightmare would be able to lull them all to sleep.

Even if he could, there was no guarantee that his steed would be able to contain these monsters in the maze of nightmares indefinitely. Sunny himself had escaped that maze once, after all, shattering its walls during his battle against Nightmare.

Those walls were made from the nightmares that served the black stallion. Nightmare planted their seeds into the hearts of living beings and then harvested them, turning them into his minions. The fallen immortals would endure quite a few, no doubt… but they would dream their own nightmares as well.

In the end, Nightmare would have to subjugate the dreams of ancient immortals faster than his minions were destroyed, building his own legion of nightmares dreadful enough to contain them.

Subduing the grotesque abominations and keeping them subdued — these were the two problems facing Sunny, and he was not sure that a Transcendent Terror could manage both, at least not in a timely manner.

But while Nightmare had not evolved to a new Rank since Godgrave, Sunny had.

He had grown stronger in many aspects apart from Rank, as well. And five of his incarnations were here.

With five Supreme shadows augmenting Nightmare, he had a good chance of solving at least the first problem — infecting the restrained immortals with the Dream Curse.

From that point onward, though, Nightmare would be on his own. No one but the dark destrier himself could keep his victims lost in the labyrinth of dreadful dreams.

'Come on, Nightmare…'

While countless shades struggled to restrain the fallen immortals, Nightmare lowered his head and cast his terrifying, crimson gaze at them. Sunny could not see the Dream Curse spreading, and he could not even sense it…

But the world around them suddenly felt dark and terrifying, and an eerie chill seemed to permeate the air.

Far above, perched atop the Dark Castle, the Puppeteer moved its antennae, as if wary of something.

Jet looked around with a slight frown, her beautiful face growing a little paler.

Time seemed to stretch, flowing slowly…

But then, eventually, there was a subtle change to the strange and eerie scene in front of them.

Just a few meters away from Nightmare, a beautiful youth was sprawled on the ground, held firmly in place by black chains and the mandibles of several Obsidian Wasps. Despite his calm and benevolent expression, the immortal was straining to free himself forcefully, the stone around him cracking and mending itself without stop.

Gradually, though, his struggles seemed to grow less intense. His gaze grew dimmer, and his eyelids grew heavy. The young man blinked a few times, his eyes remaining closer for a bit longer each time.

And then, they did not open.

His struggles ceased.

He was asleep.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'It seems to be working.'

After that fist success, many more followed, as well. Soon enough, an eerie silence enveloped the plaza.

The shades were standing without movement, and on the ground between them, the harrowing immortals of the Eternal City were sleeping peacefully, the black currents of the Stormsea glistening with silver light in the sky above them.

…Or maybe not so peacefully, at all.

Chapter-2639: Deep Sleep

Sunny and Jet stood side by side, observing the magnificent plaza with incredulous expressions. The shades had retreated to form a defensive formation around the Dark Castle, and the vast open expanse around them was littered with beautiful men and women who lay on the cold stone, fast asleep.

There was no sign of the recent devastation left anywhere in sight, and none of the sleeping youths bore even a single wound… it seemed as if they were fairies who had simply fallen asleep after making merry throughout the night.

Sunny had deactivated the five links of the Curse, for now, so that its passive enchantment could do its work — the [Dark Embrace] enhanced the rate with which his shades were mended by his soul, and since quite a number of them had been vanquished in the battle, he needed to get them back as soon as possible.

Jet remained silent for a while, then cast a sideways glance at Nightmare, who stood nearby.

Her expression was neutral.

"I… I rode atop that thing, huh?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Sure. He's a horse, though. So why not?"

Nightmare snorted in response and raised his head a little.

Jet stared at Sunny for a moment.

"A horse. I see, he's a horse. How did you get this kind of horse, anyway?"

He scratched the tip of his nose.

"Well, funnily enough… I made a deal with a crazy immortal to spend a night in a creepy castle. To fix my broken heart. That's how Nightmare and I first met."

Jet blinked a couple of times, prompting him to smile faintly.

"One thing led to another... and I killed him. And now, he's my horse."

She inhaled deeply, then shook her head and looked away.

"I already thought so after Godgrave, but your horse is terrifying. I guess it makes sense, though… who else would use a Transcendent Terror as a steed if not the Lord of Shadows?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Says the dead woman who sails around on a living ship made by a daemon from a Heart God's branch. And I'd imagine that many people would… it's just that few people can."

In truth, he was not in the mood for jokes. Sunny was not particularly tired, but defeating these immortal abominations had not lessened his apprehension one bit. This battle was merely a prelude to the true hardship — now that they had established a foothold in the Eternal City, the actual conquest would soon begin.

Jet studied the sleeping immortals.

"So… what do we do with them now? I don't suppose we can just leave them to nap here?"

Sunny was asking himself the same question, as well.

He hesitated for a few moments, then commanded Mimic to open its gates.

As the massive gates began to move, the shades did, as well. Picking up the motionless bodies of the immortals, they turned around and carried them into the great dark maw of the Marvelous Mimic.

Jet observed them with a dubious expression.

"Are you sure that this is a good idea?"

Sunny hesitated.

He was not trying to feed the immortals to Mimic, merely store them in its spacious halls. Still, it could prove dangerous — if Nightmare failed to keep the abominations asleep, they would wake up inside the Dark Castle, giving it the worst case of indigestion in history.

Not to mention opening Sunny to a fatal attack from the rear.

It also prevented him from dismissing Mimic, since doing so would carry the sleeping immortals straight to the lightless depths of his souls…

Sunny did not know what would happen then, and wasn't particularly interested in finding out.

He sighed.

"I am not sure. However… this is the best terrible idea I've got. It is safer than leaving them in the open, at least."

Jet contemplated for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well, if you say so…"

While the shades carried the monstrous creatures inside, Sunny and Jet spent some time examining their sleeping enemies. He attempted to carry one into the Shadow Realm, and — just as expected — felt a powerful sorcery preventing the immortal from leaving the boundary of the Eternal City.

'Daeron would not have left any loopholes, I bet…'

Jet had been studying the immortals as well, in the meantime.

After a while, she frowned. Noticing her troubled expression, Sunny asked:

"Did you discover something?"

She remained silent for a few moments.

"They don't have soul cores."

He tilted his head a little.

'Indeed.'

Sunny himself had noted that the vile darkness hiding in the souls of the corrupted immortals did not have the usual nodes. However, he had no idea what that meant — or rather, too many ideas to consider any one seriously.

"What do you think that means?"

Perhaps Jet could come up with a good theory.

She did not answer immediately, looking at the sleeping immortal with a somber expression. Then, she asked him an unexpected question:

"Sunny… do you know when a mushroom dies?"

He blinked a few times.

"W—what… what kind of question is that?"

The question seemed preposterous. But, of course, his Flaw forced him to give an honest answer.

And that, in turn, forced him to consider the question seriously. When he did, he realized that he did not really know.

"No idea, actually. When it's harvested… no, when it's cooked? When it's eaten?"

Jet looked back at the immortal.

"Those are all good answers. But actually, mushrooms never really die, because they're never really alive, to begin with — not in our understanding, at least. Because mushrooms are not organisms…

they're merely organs. The real organism is the mycelium that is hidden underground, so when we're picking mushrooms, we're just taking its fruit. You can say that a tree died, but you wouldn't say that an apple did, would you?"

Sunny stared at her with a strange expression.

"I guess not. But, Jet… are you alright? Is the lack of oxygen getting to your brain, perhaps? Why the hell are you telling me this?"

Actually, he already had an idea of what she was trying to say. He did not like the implications, though.

Jet sighed.

"This is the impression I get from these abominations. That they're not really abominations… just little parts of a far larger one. That would explain why they don't have soul cores — because there are no souls in their bodies, just fragments of a soul."

Sunny remained silent for a long while before answering.

"First of all… can we move on from the mushroom metaphor, please? It's giving me the creeps."

He grimaced and then added reluctantly:

"So, anyway. If these are merely mushroom fruit… then where's the mushroom tree?"

Instead of answering, Jet simply turned to the center of the Eternal City.

There, a massive structure towered above the radiant spires.

Chapter-2640: Battle Plan

The structure at the heart of the Eternal City resembled a soaring, monolithic palace with sharp spires piercing the darkness of the underwater chasm. These spires, however, did not emanate beautiful silver light — instead, they were black and lifeless, making the palace seem like a jagged mass of darkness.

There were several structures in the Eternal City that stood out among the rest: the Wharf, the Lighthouse, the Clocktower… but the Palace was the largest of them all, sprawled across an entire island and set under the highest point of the invisible dome protecting the city from the crushing weight of water.

Jet looked at the dark spires looming in the distance, then shrugged.

"I am willing to bet that the most important thing in this city is hidden there. The Dutchman is probably moving in that direction, as well."

She lingered for a moment.

"So, what is the plan?"

Sunny contemplated for a while.

"Well, now that the Night Garden is being repaired, we have two main goals left. Secure the source of the Storm God's lineage and find what I am looking for. The former is located in the Lighthouse, while the latter… the Palace is a good bet. There's also the building that looks like an armory, as well as several other interesting landmarks. The problem is that they are situated in different directions."

He smiled darkly.

"Another problem is that this city is populated by a vast horde of

immortal Great Ones — in fact, the city is what makes them immortal. Ideally, we should conquer this entire place, but that does not seem like a realistic goal at the moment. Unless we find a way to destroy the sorcery making the city eternal, that is. Granted, the same sorcery seems to be preventing the Stormsea from crushing it into dust, so there's that."

Sunny shook his head.

"We should go for the Lighthouse and the Palace. If an opportunity to conquer the city presents itself in the process, we might consider it then. These are long-term goals, though. As for right now…"

Jet looked at him and asked in a relaxed tone:

"Survive?"

He nodded.

"Yes. At the moment, far more immortals than the ones we dealt with are moving toward us. And when they arrive, we might not be able to defeat them all."

Jet smiled.

"We can't allow them to corner us on this island, right? If several swarms descend upon us here, even your shadow wraiths won't be able to withstand the assault. We'll be buried under an avalanche of flesh."

Sunny hated to admit it, but Jet was right. They had suffered many casualties while enjoying a great numerical advantage… without it, even the Shadow Legion would struggle to win. Worse still, even if they repelled the second wave of immortals, there would be a third one, and the fourth, each more overwhelming than the previous one.

The shades would not be truly destroyed, but if Sunny was not careful, all of them would be vanquished one after another, leaving him to face a city full of indestructible Great Nightmare Creatures alone.

"So, what do you suggest?"

He had his own considerations, but not using Jet and her rich experience would be foolish.

She lingered for a few moments, then said in an even tone:

"If we can't allow ourselves to be cornered… we must attack. Advance to the neighboring islands, stretch out the line of combat contact, and let our superior numbers shine."

Sunny smiled.

"That was my thinking, as well. We should cross to the three islands connected to this one by bridges, find easily reinforced positions, and repel the second wave of immortals."

He fell silent and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Things will get difficult from there, because we'll be nearing the inner ring of the city. Those three islands are connected to many more, and from different directions, as well — so, we will be flanked while repelling frontal assaults. It is hard to predict what will happen exactly, though, because we don't know enough about the Eternal City yet."

Jet nodded.

"Advance, conquer territory, establish reinforced positions… rinse and repeat. The Lighthouse is similar to the Wharf, though — both are situated on the outskirts of the city — while the Palace is standing dead in the center. Which one are we going to go for first?"

Sunny grimaced.

The Lighthouse was easier to reach, since they could simply move along the outer perimeter of the Eternal City to get there. The Palace, however… if the Dutchman was indeed carving a path to it, then they needed to arrive before the wraith army.

He remained silent for a while, then asked:

"How long do you think the Night Garden will need to stay at the wharf to be repaired?"

Jet hesitated.

"I am not sure. We can set sail at any moment, though — either to escape or to circle the city and make landfall at a different point."

Sunny contemplated silently, feeling the pain of his Flaw growing more and more intense. He still had not answered Jet's question, after all.

Eventually, he said:

"Then let's go after the Lighthouse and the Palace at the same time."

He looked at the distant spires of the Palace somberly.

"The Shadow Legion will launch an invasion into the depths of the Eternal City, slowly making its way to the central island. The Night Garden, meanwhile, will sail along the edges of the dome and bring us directly to the Lighthouse."

Sunny looked at Jet with a grim determination.

"If everything goes well — or rather, if we'll make it go well — we will launch a second offensive toward the Palace, this time from the Lighthouse. Then, we will see who gets to it first."

Jet sighed.

"Sounds like a plan. I have just one question, though…"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She grinned.

"Are you sure that we don't want to just get the hell out of here?"

Sunny stared at her with an incredulous expression for a while.

"Of course, we want to. Do you think that fighting immortal abominations on the bottom of the sea is how I want to spend my days? Did I not mention that I hate water?"

He grimaced.

"However, reality does not always cater to our wishes. So… let's wage a war on this cursed city and conquer it."

Jet smiled lazily.

"Let's. Oh, and by the way… yes."

She patted Sunny on the shoulder.

"I do think that, deep down, that is how you want to spend your days."

Sunny scoffed.

'Joke's on her. I'm not that deep…'

Chapter-2641: Marathon Battle

The gears of war were turning.

In the northern reaches of the Eternal City, the Dutchman and its wraith army were engaged in a fierce battle against the corrupted immortals, slowly pushing their way toward the Palace.

In the southernmost part of the city, the Shadow Legion had conquered a foothold and was now preparing to advance.

Far in the east, the colossal Clocktower oversaw the silent streets; in the west, the Lighthouse shone with brilliant silver light.

Sunny felt a sense of urgency as he commanded his shades to march north.

'This is not at all like the Burned Forest…'

His campaign to conquer the outskirts of the Burned Forest had been a slow affair. Fierce skirmishes had been followed by swift retreats and prolonged periods of relative peace — Sunny would dismiss the remaining shades and evade the pursuing Black Millipedes alone, waiting for his growing legion to restore itself and wage another battle.

It had been like a dreadful game of cat and mouse.

The battle for the Eternal City was going to be different. Soon enough, the Shadow Legion was going to clash with the fallen immortals once again — and once it did, there would be no pause and no reprieve from the daunting violence of war until it was all over… one way or another.

That marathon battle was going to be far more strategic and involve far more moving parts, as well, so he expected to suffer unimaginable

mental strain and truly put Mind Weave to the test, exploring its very limits.

Sunny did not feel wary or apprehensive, though. He did not feel particularly excited or on edge, either — instead, he was calm and collected, full of focus and grounded determination.

After all, war was nothing new to him after all these years.

'Time is running out.'

At the moment, his five incarnations had split up, and so did the Shadow Legion.

There were three islands bordering the one connected to the Wharf. Therefore, one of his incarnations was retreating back to the Night Garden with Jet — they were going to sail along the edges of the Eternal City and make landfall directly at the Lighthouse.

The second incarnation was augmenting the Puppeteer atop the Dark Castle, and the remaining three were accompanying different contingents of the Shadow Legion, each moving toward one of the island bridges.

The first contingent was led by Saint, who was supported by Fiend. The third contingent was led by Slayer, with Serpent keeping her company. The second contingent… was a bit special, since that one was the smallest and led directly by Sunny and the Puppeteer Moth.

'This is going to be interesting.'

Sunny's consciousness split between the countless shades of his legions, spread across three advancing forces, with the Puppeteer serving as the focal point of the entire army.

Intangible strings of black silk spread in the sky above the Eternal City, visible only to Sunny.

The Saint Army reached the edge of the island first. Out there, the ornate buildings receded, opening to a vast emptiness. Far below, raging currents crashed into the basalt foundation of the city, foaming as they rushed with terrible speed.

A wide bridge arched as it spanned half a dozen kilometers that separated the two islands, and on the other side, the fallen immortals were already moving between buildings.

Sunny observed the vast chasm and the dark water seething at its bottom, wondering if the Eternal City had always been separated into islands or if it had shattered while plummeting from the Black Skies to the bottom of the sea. In any case, falling down seemed like a bad idea.

It was not that creatures of the caliber present in the Eternal City would be severely damaged in the fall or had no ways of climbing back up, but rather the fact that the elevation difference would give their enemies a fatal advantage. More than that, he could vaguely sense movement in the water.

There had to be some kind of abominable beings dwelling at the bottom of the Eternal City, and from the looks of it, they were different from the corrupted immortals — the beautiful youths seemed to be wary of the edges of the islands, at least, which made him feel reluctant to dive into the dark waters himself.

'How curious.'

What could these immortal fiends fear?

Sunny hoped to never find out.

In any case, that did not matter at the moment.

The shape of the bridge itself dictated the nature of the battle. Since it was arched, the side that controlled its crest would possess a minor advantage — it would face the enemy from an elevated position, while the enemy would have to fight on an upward slope. So, Saint and her soldiers had to occupy the crest as soon as possible.

That could be accomplished easily enough.

As the first of the immortals rushed across the bridge, the massive figure of Fiend dove into the shadows. Usually, using Shadow Step was a swift ordeal — all one had to do was enter the shadows and step out of them. However, due to Fiend's prodigious size, the simple

act of submerging his towering body into the embrace of shadows took some time.

He still rose from the shadows on the crest of the bridge before the immortals, though. The infernal colossus of blackened steel met them with a torrent of flames, incinerating their abominable bodies — by the time they were revived, Saints and her shades had already caught up to him, building an orderly formation and advancing at a steady march.

At the forefront of the Saint Army were the shadows of Godgrave and a large number of monstrous millipedes, their long bodies encased in impenetrable black chitin.

Once Saint took control of the crest of the wide bridge, the strategy of her army became simple: she built an indestructible bulwark and allowed the enemies to crush themselves against it.

Saint stood in front of her soldiers, clad in fearsome jade armor and wielding her usual round shield — Fiend was beside her, as well, with his indestructible steel body. Behind them was a wall of black chitin, with the monstrous shadows of Godgrave serving as the fangs of the largely defensive formation.

Saints regarded the approaching immortals with her usual air of indifference, and then struck the rim of her shield twice.

Fiend let out a thunderous roar, and behind him, countless millipedes clicked their mandibles, causing a loud rumbling to roll across the bridge.

In the next moment, an avalanche of abhorrent flesh collided against the formation of Saint's army, and all hell broke loose.

Chapter-2642: Three Bridges

At the same time as the Saint Army entered the battle for the western bridge, the Slayer Army reached the eastern span of the chasm. Here, the landscape was rather similar, except for the fact that the great bridge was flat as opposed to arched and not quite as wide.

The battle was very different, though.

As the torrent of fallen immortals entered the bridge, rushing across its surface like a harrowing tide, a cold wind blew across the chasm. Then, something glistened in the air.

It was a snowflake… one at first, then one more, then an endless number of them.

In a strange turn of events, on that day, snow fell at the bottom of the Stormsea.

The winds howled, reaching a frightening speed and intensity, and a violent blizzard enveloped the world in its frigid embrace. The temperature plummeted, and the milky-white veil of snow obscured everything in sight.

The snowstorm, of course, was summoned by the shadow of the Winter Beast.

Somewhat weakened, but largely indifferent to the hurricane winds and the lethal cold, the fallen immortals continued moving forward.

One of them had almost reached the middle points of the bridge when a black arrow suddenly fell from above, pinning him to the stone. The fiend struggled to break free, tearing his ghastly flesh in the process — a moment later, another arrow appeared noiselessly from the snow, severing his body in half.

And then, as other fallen immortals overtook the bleeding body, massive silhouettes suddenly dove at them from the snow. Those were the Shadow Wolves, tearing the abhorrent abominations apart with their enormous maws.

Drowned by the howling of the wind, a quiet rustle followed them. Soon enough, the figures of the Obsidian Wasps rushed between the giant Wolves, joining the massacre.

And then, finally, eerily beautiful ember patterns ignited in the veil of snow, stretching high into the air. They heralded the arrival of the Ember Queen — Slayer was standing on her enormous head, already nocking another arrow, and a great tide of the Black Millipedes flowed past her to join the fight.

Among them was another Millipede Queen, this one seemingly forged from glistening onyx — it was Serpent, who had assumed that form for the moment.

The dark surface of the bridge was swiftly covered by snow, and the snow was swiftly painted red by the blood of the grotesque immortals.

But that was not all.

Unseen in the blizzard, two currents of shadows extended on both sides of the bridge, spanning its length. Soon, they solidified into glistening obsidian, becoming bridges of their own — their smooth surface was immediately hidden by the segmented carapaces of countless millipedes, who were rushing forward to attack the fallen immortals from the flanks.

Saint commanded the forces of the Shadow Legion in the west, while Slayer commanded them in the east…

That only left the middle bridge.

The scene taking place there was no less stunning, albeit far more bizarre.

Out there, in front of the bridge, the ornate buildings collapsed, raising a vast cloud of dust.

And in that dust, a strange, colossal silhouette revealed itself, moving slowly toward the chasm.

Soon, the colossal figure reached the bridge, revealing itself to be…

A towering, imposing dark castle.

The castle moved across the rubble on eight towering segmented legs, akin to a gargantuan spider. A titanic moth was perched on its tallest tower, and countless strands of black silk extended from it east and west, bloating out the sky of the Eternal City like an ethereal spider web.

That was the Marvelous Mimic, of course. Both Mimic and the Puppeteer were currently augmented by one avatar of Sunny, and every shade of the Shadow Legion capable of ranged attacks was currently manning the castle's walls. The shadows of Daeron and the human Saints were there, as well, while Goliath, the Defiled Seeker of Truth, and the Remnant of the Jade Queen were escorting it.

The Dark Castle stepped onto the great bridge, instantly blocking its entire width, and continued moving forward. Soon enough, the defenders of its walls unleashed a devastating barrage of ranged attacks on the attacking immortals, reducing them to torn shreds of slithering flesh.

Three battles raged at the same time, and on each of the three bridges, the forces of the Shadow Legion were slowly advancing.

…There was a fourth battle happening at the same time, as well, hidden from view.

Out there in the throne room of the Dark Castle, a deep shadow rested beneath the obsidian throne. It was Nightmare, having returned to its shapeless form.

At the moment, the fallen immortals infected by his Dream Curse were locked in the maze of nightmares, shattering them one after another. At the same time, the seeds Nightmare had planted in them were growing, giving birth to new dreadful dreams…

The tenebrous steed had to not only keep his prey contained within

the maze and spread the Dream Curse to those of the immortals who were still awake, but also battle and subjugate each of the newborn nightmares — and do so faster than his prior minions were being destroyed, as well.

The fury of that terrible battle was in no way inferior to what was happening in reality, and maybe even more dreadful.

"...Gods."

Sunny and Jet had just reached the wharf by then. Standing on its walls, they looked back, at the beautiful vista of the Eternal City.

Jet took a deep breath.

It was hard to see the details of the three battles from where they were standing, but what little they could see was already unimaginable enough.

She remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"Why do I feel… like I'm missing all the fun?"

Hearing her own words, Jet shook her head.

"Damn. We haven't known each other that long, but I already feel as if I've spent too much time with you."

Sunny grinned.

He opened his mouth, wanting to answer, but at that moment, a distant rumble distracted them both.

Looking east, they saw something stunning — out there, far away, the colossal shape of the Clocktower…was crumbling.

The immense structure was breaking apart and folding in on itself, enormous chunks of stone falling down in clouds of dust and debris. The scale of this destruction was simply daunting.

Sunny frowned.

His own forces were nowhere near the western reaches of the Eternal City, and the Dutchman was far in the north.

That only left the mysterious third contender. That thing, whatever it was, must have caused this scene.

His frown deepened.

"...Because fun things are happening."

Turning away, Sunny headed toward the Night Garden.

"Let's go. There's no time to waste."

Chapter-2643: Healing Process

The beauty and tranquility of the blooming wharf were in stark contrast with the horrid carnage of the battle taking place on the other side of the island — especially for Sunny, whose consciousness was split between both. Walking to the inner edge of the wall with determined steps, he jumped off, plummeted about a hundred meters, and landed softly on the bow of the Night Garden.

Naeve was standing guard there, listening to the distant clamor of the devastating battle with a grim expression. Sunny's arrival seemed to alleviate some of his worry, and when Jet joined them, most of his tension disappeared.

Glancing at the walls of the wharf, Naeve exhaled slowly.

"What the hell is happening there?"

Sunny gave him a brief look.

"A dead army is battling an immortal army. It's quite hideous."

With that, he looked around and asked:

"A better question is what's happening here. This wharf was supposed to repair the Night Garden — how is that going?"

Naeve hesitated for a moment.

"Aether would be able to answer better, since he is in the runic hall, but in short — Nightwalker was right. The Night Garden is indeed being mended, although we are not quite sure what it means just yet."

Sunny had already been reasonably confident of that fact, but it was good to receive a confirmation.

As Jet studied her ship with curiosity, he asked:

"So… how long do you think it will take?"

Naeve raised an eyebrow.

"Probably quite some time. Days... maybe weeks. Why?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Because we were hoping to take the Night Garden on a small voyage. The situation in the city is difficult, so having it at our disposal would be of great help."

It was truly a blessing that the living ship was safe from the horrid abominations populating the Eternal City, already. If not for Daeron and his runic array... Sunny shuddered to imagine what would have happened once they drew close to the sunken ruin.

There was a good reason why the Serpent King had not only built a barrier around the city, but also left a warning to anyone wishing to explore it.

Jet smiled.

"By difficult, he means that there's a myriad of abominable immortals, the Dutchman and its army of wraiths, and also something else entirely, which might be even more dreadful. The Lord of Shadows has unleashed his legion, and there are three battles between Great and Supreme beings happening at the same time. Oh, and that is just the beginning of the end of this expedition."

She sighed.

"We want to take the Night Garden directly to the Lighthouse, though, where the lineage of the Storm God is hidden. So, can it sail? And more importantly, should we interrupt the mending process?"

Naeve studied them both silently for a short while, then nodded.

"It can sail, and it doesn't matter whether we do or not."

It was Sunny's turn to be surprised.

"It doesn't matter?"

Naeve nodded calmly.

"You must keep in mind that the Night Garden is not a mundane ship. It is not merely an enchanted ship, either — instead, it is a living ship. So, the reality of how it is being repaired is different from how we would usually imagine it."

He pointed at the deck beneath their feet.

"The wharf is not literally repairing its broken parts, like one would a mundane vessel. Rather, it is as if… the wharf infused the Night Garden with a great torrent of vitality. That vitality, in turn, fueled the ability of the Night Garden to mend itself — much like a living being would heal naturally. So although we say that it is being repaired, in truth it is more like it's healing."

He shrugged.

"So it doesn't matter that much if we stay docked or not. The process has already been initiated, so it will continue even if the Night Garden leaves the wharf."

Sunny looked at him for a while, then looked at Jet.

Then, he smiled.

"That's what I want to hear!"

The process of healing would probably reach its conclusion faster if the Night Garden remained in the blossoming berth, but it could continue unseen even if the living ship dove back into the crushing darkness of the Stormsea.

This was truly great news — not only because it allowed Sunny to use the living ship in the battle for the Eternal City, but also because it gave them an opportunity to retreat without worry. Even if other goals of the expedition ended up not being achieved, the Night Garden would benefit.

So, Sunny did not have to feel too worried anymore.

"Let us cast off, then."

He looked at them with a smile, hesitated for a moment, and then added in a nonchalant tone:

"...How do we do that, by the way?"

As it turned out, leaving the berth was just as easy as entering it.

The Night Garden was currently connected to the wharf by the branches that supported its weight. Its hull and the berth had become a single whole, and therefore, the sorcery of the living ship expanded to contain the sorcery empowering the titanic wharf, as well.

So, the person controlling the Night Garden could control the wharf, too. Granted, there was no instruction manual on how to do it — nevertheless, Aether had been able to learn how to activate the simplest functions after a short period of experimentation.

Soon enough, Sunny heard the sound of rushing water, and saw great waterfalls spilling into the vast reservoir of the berth. The water level rose slowly, and as it did, the wharf slowly retracted its branches one by one, separating itself from the living ship.

Finally, the great gates of the colossal wharf opened, and the dark expanse of water revealed itself once more.

The Night Garden slowly glided out of the birth and reached the edges of the dome protecting the Eternal City.

Then, turning its bow, it took course toward the Lighthouse.

Chapter-2644: Suffering from Success

The battle of the three bridges had started from a stunning explosion of violence, and as it progressed, the carnage only grew more dreadful. Facing the fallen immortals of the Eternal City, Sunny felt as if he was finally experiencing what it was like to face him and his Shadow Legion — needless to say, that made him quite uncomfortable.

It did not matter, really, how powerful his shades were or how finely he controlled their movements. The personal skill and valor of his Shadows did not matter either — no matter how well they fought and how many enemies they killed, the fallen immortals inevitably returned to life and dove back into combat, their grotesque flesh bulging with lethal tendrils and morphing into terrible maws.

The shades themselves could not be destroyed, but it took them much longer to return to the battlefield after being vanquished. So, time was not on Sunny's side. With a subtle shudder, he fully realized that his eventual defeat was inevitable — sooner or later, the citizens of the Eternal City would completely obliterate the Shadow Legion and consume him. There was simply no escape.

…If he played by the rules, of course, which Sunny had no intention of doing.

Why follow the rules and lose when he could cheat and win?

'It's still a little disturbing, though.'

His own intent and ability to deal with the immortal prisoners of the Eternal City were a stark reminder that Sunny was not invincible, either. His shades were indestructible, true — but only until he met a being disinclined to follow the rules, as well.

'Immortality is really a curse.'

Or at least it could become one.

On each of the three bridges, his shades were trying to achieve the same result through different means.

Saints and her soldiers had built an impregnable wall and steadily weathered the tide of hungry flesh, Slayer and her beasts hunted down the enemies in the snow, while the defenders of the Dark Castle unleashed a storm of ranged attacks on the ghastly abominations — but their end goal was the same.

Minimize their losses and gradually restrain the enemy until the Dream Curse takes hold. Defense, offense, and a combination of both.

On the western bridge, the Black Millipedes had flanked the fallen immortals, who were now caught between them and Slayer's main force. The murderous Shadow herself had spent her quiver of powerful enchanted arrows and leaped into battle, assuming the form of a bizarre beast whose massive body and long tail were covered by impenetrable scales, and who could turn into an armored ball.

The scales turned out to be all but indestructible — the tendrils of the fallen immortals, at least, failed to pierce them, while the immortals themselves were easily crushed by the rolling beast or torn apart by its sharp claws after it unfurled its giant body.

Serpent moved in their midst, as well, shifting between various forms…

On the middle bridge, the Dark Castle was steadily moving forward. Mimic was merely a Transcendent Shadow, but it was currently augmented by one of Sunny's incarnations — so, its walls had tuned durable enough to withstand the glancing attacks of the fallen immortals, even if just barely.

Most of the abominations were torn to shreds by the ranged attacks of the defenders before reaching the castle, but in the end, many of them inevitably began to scale the walls. Reaching the battlements, they were met by the shadows of Daeron and the human Saints, cut

down, and swallowed by black chains.

In front of the marching castle, on the bridge, the Defiled Seeker of Truth expelled clouds of deadly miasma, the Remnant of the Jade Queen breathed out torrents of caustic volcanic ash, while Goliath gazed upon the rushing abominations, washing everything it beheld in immolating heat.

On the eastern bridge, a wall of black chitin was refusing to buckle under an avalanche of hungry flesh. The Asuras of Condemnation and the bestial horrors of Godrave advanced through the breaches in the phalanx of monstrous millipedes, crushing and severing the bodies of the fallen immortals. Fiend rampaged in front of the defensive formation, serving as its vanguard.

Saints herself, meanwhile, had carved a bloody path to advance forward. Surrounded by grotesque horrors of the Eternal City from all sides, she calmly activated the [Shield of Nothing] and descended upon the abominable creatures, moving under a veil of true darkness.

Sunny and the Puppeteer controlled all three armies, tensely observing the changing currents of the battle.

'This… is a problem.'

The fallen immortals were powerful, and there were a lot of them. Not all of these abominations had been humans once, either — there were bestial horrors among them, as well, each like a moving abyss of abhorrent, murderous flesh. However, Sunny had managed to bridge the divide between the Shadow Legion and the dwellers of the Eternal City with skill, strategy, and cohesion of his silent troops.

The problem, however, was in the nature of this battle. Killing the enemies only slowed them down a little, and to truly deal with them, they had to be restrained and eventually infected by the Dream Curse. But while temporarily destroying the body of a fallen immortal was a task that an individual shade could accomplish, restraining them required continuous efforts of at least a couple of shades.

Which meant that with each enemy Sunny neutralized, the number of his soldiers diminished — even if none of them were vanquished.

Something had to change.

And soon, it did.

Just as Saint was finally forced to move back on the eastern bridge… a powerful explosion rocked it, and dozens of immortals in front of her were torn to pieces. A moment later, another explosion bloomed, and a powerful shockwave sent the enemy reeling.

That was the Night Garden, sailing at the edge of the invisible barrier that protected the Eternal City while circling it from the east.

As they left the Wharf and passed the island, a perfect view of the eastern bridge and the battle happening on it opened to the right of the living ship.

Which meant that its starboard cannons had a direct line of fire, and could unleash a devastating bombardment on the attacking immortals.

There were no firing crews and Ascended officers on deck to fuel the cannons with essence and load them, though…

So, instead, Sunny loaded and aimed the cannons himself, summoning countless black hands from the shadows, then charged the cannon balls with his own Supreme essence.

As a series of explosions erased swathes of the advancing abominations from the great bridge, Saint and her army advanced swiftly.

Chapter-2645: The More You Learn

The bombardment of the Night Garden descended on the northern span of the great bridge, carving bloody paths in the tide of hideous flesh. A bloody haze drifted above the vast chasm, and pieces of torn bodies rained down.

Saint retreated just in time to avoid being swept away in the deadly barrage, sliding back on the slick stone while plunging her sword into it to arrest her momentum. A split second later, she regained her balance and lunged forward, cutting down one of the fallen immortals who had escaped the first salvo of the Night Garden.

Due to her monumental height, she looked like a towering statue from a distance. Fiend was at least four times higher — at that moment, however, his fearsome figure suddenly shrank, becoming only a head taller than her. His mass remained the same, though, so when he lunged forward to join Saint, the great bridge quaked and trembled.

Together, they massacred the vanguard of the immortal swarm. Fire and darkness intertwined like a primal inferno, reminding Sunny of the ancient murals depicting the flames of Desire burning in the everlasting Void.

The Shadow Legion advanced.

With the Night Garden bombarding the bridge, it was as if the roots of the immortal swarm had been cut. The grotesque abominations were still swiftly rising from the dead, but since the massive cannonballs continued to decimate them, fewer managed to reach the line of battle contact intact — and because of that, the balance of power between them and the silent shades shifted.

With fewer enemies to deal with, Saint and her army were able to restrain them faster, and once they gained that advantage, their progress snowballed.

Standing on the deck of the Night Garden, Naeve observed the distant battle with a stunned expression. This was his first time witnessing the Shadow Legion — or any Sovereign going all out, for that matter — so he was reasonably taken aback.

Eventually, he said in a low voice:

"So this is your true power."

Sunny, who had been busy loading and firing twelve massive cannons of his own creation, gave him a sideways glance.

"Technically, this is one-third of five sevenths of my true power. But it is close enough, I guess."

Slowly, Naeve's gaze turned subtly bitter. Looking away from the furious battle raging on the distant bridge, he sighed.

"In the past, I've often wondered how things would have been different if the House of Night had managed to produce a Sovereign. What would have happened if Nightwalker was still here…"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"I think you got it all wrong. Great Clans do not produce Sovereigns — it's the opposite. Sovereigns produce Great Clans. So, in a sense, the House of Night was the most impressive of the Great Clans, because you achieved that title without being supported by a Supreme."

Naeve shook his head.

"We were still wiped out, in the end. Even if we weren't, we were destined to fade into obscurity as Valor and Song conquered everything."

He remained silent for a while, then looked at Sunny and asked:

"What does it feel like, to wield the power akin to a deity?"

Jet, who was leaning against a wooden beam nearby, smiled.

"Yes. What does it feel like?"

Sunny did not answer immediately, concentrating on his countless shades, the shadows he was manifesting, and firing the cannons.

Eventually, he said:

"I guess it makes you feel… small."

It was not the answer they expected, so both seemed surprised.

"Small?"

Sunny nodded.

"You are both Saints, so you should understand. The more powerful you become and the more you learn, the more painfully you understand just how weak and ignorant you are. However, there is solace in anonymity. As a mundane person, you know that there are billions of people who are no different from you. As an Awakened, there are hundreds of thousands, at least a hundred as a Saint. But there are only a few Sovereigns. So being weak and ignorant… feels much more personal."

He paused for a moment and then chuckled.

"Ah, but don't misunderstand. It's not all bad. In fact, being a demigod feels great. To be honest, my youth was quite miserable — every day, I struggled just to survive. Now, though… now, I wouldn't even know how to die. Killing me is strictly a theoretical possibility."

Having witnessed the state of the immortal dwellers of the Eternal City, however, Sunny was not as comforted by being nearly unkillable as before.

On the bridge, Saint and her army were steadily making their way to the new island. With the support of the Night Garden, the pressure on her and her troops reduced by a large margin — so large, in fact, that

Sunny could shift some of these forces elsewhere.

So, he sent Fiend and fresh reinforcements to the other two bridges. Most importantly, he released Saint from the embrace of his shadow and sent that incarnation to augment the Marvelous Mimic, as well. With three of his avatars concentrated on the middle bridge, he could unleash the power of the Curse and weaken the fallen immortals there better.

These bridges were a perfect battlefield for the [Weakening Curse], in fact, because only a limited number of enemies could attack his forces simultaneously there. That allowed him to concentrate the debilitating sorcery of the shadowbound charm on the foremost enemies, thus maximizing its effectiveness.

With reinforcements arriving from the eastern bridge, the situation on the other two had shifted, too. Slowly at first, then exponentially faster, the scales of battle started to tip in Sunny's favor. Once he gained an advantage, it only continued to grow.

And before too long, the three battles reached their conclusion.

Saint, Slayer, and the Marvelous Mimic had crossed the bridges and entered the three islands, leading the Shadow Legion onto their shores.

…Of course, the conclusion of the battle for the three bridges did not mean that all combat ceased. The islands were teeming with horrid, immortal abominations, so the battle continued, even if its intensity lessened.

It had simply entered a new phase.

Chapter-2646: Shadow Commander

The Night Garden had left the Wharf, so Sunny saw no need to keep a presence on the island connected to it. Having cleansed it from the abominable immortals, the Shadow Legion abandoned the territory it had previously conquered and advanced northward to three neighboring districts of the Eternal City.

Each of the three islands was larger and more densely developed than the Wharf Island — and populated by more abominations, as well. The immortals dwelling there seemed slightly more powerful, with more champions akin to the abhorrent silver tiger hiding in their midst.

One of the islands seemed like a residential area, one resembled a leisure district with vibrant shops and theaters scattered among peaceful alleys, while the last one was mostly taken up by an exquisite park.

Beautiful trees rustled quietly in the nebulous darkness, their silver leaves glistening in the rays of falling light. Ponds and winding canals rested under the black abyss of the watery sky above, and tall hills rose above the landscape, cascading toward the promenades built along the edges of the island.

Saint and her army invaded the leisure district, Slayer led her bestial force into the residential one, while the Mervalous Mimic entered the park. Each of the three forces was met with its own set of challenges, dictated both by its composition and the terrain of the three battlefields.

The nature of the battle kept changing, and Sunny had to adapt swiftly.

His legion was facing a far greater number of enemies now, so its numerical advantage did not play a large role anymore. The Dream Curse was not spreading among the restrained immortals fast enough, either, and Sunny did not have enough shades to keep restraining them indefinitely — so, he had to keep releasing captured enemies despite knowing that they would attack him again.

Additionally, the three islands were not only larger and more populous than the first one, they were also connected to more districts of the Eternal City, which meant that many new abominations were already trickling across the wide chasms dividing them. Worse still, they were not arriving only from the north, but threatening to flank Sunny's forces on the residential and leisure islands.

Things did not look too good for the Shadow Legion…

However, the most important change in the cadence of the battle was a positive one.

Sunny had not noticed it during the battle for the Wharf Island since it was relatively short and had been fought on a smaller scale than these three terrifying collisions, but even the sorcery of the Eternal City was not omnipotent.

The fallen immortals of this sunken hell could not be destroyed, indeed. Even if they were torn apart or burned to ash, the Eternal City would restore their youthful bodies to pristine condition — endlessly, no matter how many times they perished.

However, the time it took the immortals of the Eternal City to be revived varied. At first, it only took them mere moments to rise again, but if the same abomination was killed repeatedly, that time slowly increased. Already, some of the immortals whom the Shadow Legion had fought on the bridges spent entire minutes remaining dead.

That was still incomparable to the silent shades of the Shadow Legion, since the more powerful of them needed entire days to return to the battlefield. However, it introduced an entirely new dynamic to the battle for the Eternal City, giving Sunny more tools to work with.

The fallen immortals seemed to be slowly growing wary of the Shadow Legion as a result — not because they feared being destroyed by the shades, but because they feared remaining dead for too long and surrendering their chance to eviscerate the enemy to someone else.

So, the intestine of the combat lessened, somewhat, and it would probably keep changing as Sunny killed more abominations over and over again, slowing down their revival process.

In these circumstances, the ruthless economy of battle had become even more important, forcing Sunny to concentrate on a particular aspect of warfare — the use of siege engineering and fortifications.

Like a general commanding an army… well, an actual general commanding an actual army, rather… he had to conquer optimal positions on each of the three islands, entrench his forces, and slowly chip away at the swarm of immortal abominations. That was his priority at the moment.

Luckily, Sunny possessed a unique advantage as far as fortifying battle positions went.

In the leisure district, Saint and her army fought their way to a large structure that made him shudder, in secret, because of its similarity to the colosseum of the Kingdom of Hope. It was a vast theater built in an elliptical shape, with towering walls with open arches and lavish spectator seats descending toward a wide track that circled the arena… a hippodrome, if he was not mistaken.

The open nature of its walls made the Hippodrome a hardly defensible position, even if its great size and overall shape made it perfect for establishing a stronghold.

As Saint and her warriors poured into the ancient theater, the shadows around it stirred and flowed upward. They filled the wide portals cut into the walls of the Hippodrome and then solidified, closing them. At the same time, a layer of manifested shadows reinforced the stone walls, making them harder to destroy.

Wide battlements with protruding bastions were established on top of

the walls, and an inclined palisade of sharp spikes rose from its base, making approach more difficult.

Sunny was already straining himself to maintain the countless chains that bound the captured immortals, so he simply manifested these shadows permanently. That made them far less potent and far more brittle, but by overlaying multiple layers of manifested shadows on top of each other, he was able to vastly improve the resilience of the Hippodrome.

Remembering the many sieges he had ever participated in, Sunny implemented every measure he could realize in a short amount of time to make the ancient theater as difficult to conquer as possible.

Soon, a dark fortress towered above the leisure districts, bristling with countless black spikes. Saint stood atop its walls, shrouded in a mantle of darkness.

Similar things were happening on the park island and the residential island, as well...

Chapter-2647: Learning Curve

On the residential island, the blizzard summoned by the shadow of the Winter Beast had swallowed the lively streets, the private estates, and the groves surrounding ornate palatial manors. There was no easily defensible position here, so Sunny had to create one himself.

Slayer and her bestial army had taken control of the roofs, with aerial bridges made from shadows connecting them like a web. The Obsidian Wasps were able to fly, even if they were vulnerable when taking to the air — so, they were both highly mobile and unpredictable, giving her a vital advantage. Serpent, meanwhile, was supremely adaptable, capable of supporting any strategy.

And then there was the Ember Queen, of course, the shadow of a Great Tyrant who was not only fearsome in battle, but also capable of commanding the Black Millipedes and extremely elusive.

On the central island, the Marvelous Mimic and its defenders had made it to the top of a tall hill, settling there like a natural fortress. Sunny covered his castle in a carapace of manifested shadows, as well, as if dressing it in a suit of armor. There were few terrain features to make use of here, but there was hardly a more tried and tested combination than a steep slope and the walls of a fortress.

The only thing he was lacking was a deep moat, but even then, the hill bordered a deep lake on one side. Granted, the immortals of the Eternal City were not going to drown even if they fell into its water… but every advantage, no matter how small, mattered.

'Here they come…'

The forces entrenched themselves as best they could, preparing to be besieged. There was no trick Sunny could use — none that was worth the effort, at least — so he fully concentrated on his countless bodies, wanting to make the most of his combat skill and intelligence.

It was quite fascinating, really.

With the Mind Weave enhancing his mental prowess and the Puppeteer serving as the conduit of his will, Sunny had gained nearly flawless control over his shades. That meant that he could not only take full advantage of the rich legacy of tactical warfare accumulated by humanity over the ages, but also perform strategies that mundane generals had never even dreamed of.

After all, Sunny had not simply gained the ability to command his dead warriors with the same level of responsiveness as mundane soldiers would have shown. Instead, he could directly control each of his shades — so, in fact, the level of cohesion he could achieve was far beyond anything mundane armies had even been capable of.

On the most basic level, that was expressed in how well the shades supported each other in combat. The entire Shadow Legion was fighting like one vast, terrifying creature — it was as if Sunny had indeed become a demon with a myriad heads and a myriad deadly hands, sowing death and destruction anywhere he went.

Naturally, that made each of the shades far more lethal, while at the same time drastically reducing the losses of the Shadow Legion.

On a more elevated level, the unnatural cohesion between the countless shades allowed Sunny to perform strategic maneuvers that had not even been invented yet, since they were simply impossible for armies bound by the limitations of mundane warfare.

The fact that he had been able to carve a bloody path to the advantageous locations and fortify them under constant harassment by the fallen immortals was already proof of that. But really, Sunny had not even begun to explore the new horizon of possibilities opened to him now — and understandably so.

After all, it was not easy to invent an entirely new framework of military doctrines based on a set of realities that could be applied solely to him. The knowledge of military strategy Sunny possessed was the result of thousands of years of accumulated insights and breakthroughs made by genius tacticians — so, he could not be expected to accomplish that much in a single day.

He was certainly trying, though, driven by desperation and necessity.

'I do feel… like I'm a little out of my depth…'

Which was ironic, considering that he was at the bottom of the deepest ocean in the universe.

Sunny had commanded a small group of elite soldiers before, as well as a large contingent of the Sword Army in Godgrave. He had also led the Shadow Legion into battle, but never in such an involved and complicated manner. So, he was both struggling… and learning a lot, with every second of his endless, intensely violent, and harrowing battle.

Three tides of dreadful abominations descended upon the positions of the Shadow Legion...

The violence was unimaginable.

Sunny had been disturbed by the grotesque, sinister nature of the first immortal they had met in the Eternal City. Now that this one abomination was replaced by a ceaseless flood of hideous, misshapen horrors, he could not even bother to be repulsed.

But nevertheless, he was getting better at commanding his silent army with every moment. With every attack his soldiers received or delivered, Sunny was learning how to wield his power better. His vast mind spun frenetically, absorbing new information and coming to new conclusions.

And as a result, the position of the Shadow Legion was slowly improving.

On the leisure island, the tide of immortals was washing over the walls of the Hippodrome. On the park island, the defenders of the Dark Castle had established a killing field on the slopes of the hill. On the residential island, Slayer and her beasts were repelling the enemies who leaped or climbed onto the roofs of the few central blocks.

And all the while, Nightmare continued to spread the Dream Curse among the fallen immortals.

The tenebrous steed was fighting his own battle, as well. The maze of nightmares was being destroyed and rebuilt again, slowly expanding as more and more powerful creatures were imprisoned in it.

Sunny just hoped that it would endure until the expedition to the Eternal City was over.

'Sweet dreams, bastards...'

Chapter-2648: Inherent Inclinations

"How are things going there?"

The Night Garden had moved past the battle on the bridge and was now sailing around an unknown island. The deafening cannonade had ceased, and only the distant echoes of the fierce battle were breaking the tense silence.

Sunny was on the bow of the living ship, accompanied by Naeve and Jet. Giving the latter a brief look, he sighed.

"Better than expected, worse than I would have wanted."

Despite his best efforts, the Shadow Legion was still suffering casualties. If there was a consolation, though, it was that for every shade that was vanquished, several immortals were infected by the Dream Curse — the measures Sunny had taken and the fortifications he had built were doing their job.

He could not tell if this was enough, though. It seemed like he would be able to conquer the three islands in due time while suffering relatively few losses, but would that rate of attrition be acceptable in the long term?

There was no way to tell, yet, since the battle for the Eternal City was only starting.

Sunny closed his eyes and rubbed his face, feeling as if his mind was on the verge of melting.

"...As I mentioned already, I have established fortified strongholds on each of the three islands, for now. Currently, the locals are laying siege to them. Once that chaos subsides a little, I will probably try to

accomplish a few secondary goals to gain more advantages."

Jet raised an eyebrow.

"Secondary goals? Like what?"

He hesitated for a few moments.

"I was thinking of trying to destroy one of the bridges. I'll need to find out what hides in the water, as well. The Eternal City used to drift in space, too, so I am sure that there is some kind of underground communications here. I'll need to explore them to see if there are tunnels that can be used to move around the islands swiftly. Oh, but most of all…"

Sunny turned his head slightly, looking north.

"When we were approaching the city, I noticed a building that looked like it might be an armory. It will be great to go on a small excursion and see if I can arm my shades better there."

After a short silence, Naeve suddenly said in a neutral tone:

"I don't think that you'll find weapons in that building."

Sunny looked at him steadily.

"Why?"

Naeve lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"The locals don't seem like militant people."

Sunny blinked a couple of times. He was currently engaged in three terrifying battles with swarms of rabid locals, so how were they not militant?

On the other hand, he somewhat understood what Naeve meant.

The Saint of Night still explained himself, though.

"From what I've seen, this place was meant to be a sanctuary. A place of peace and prosperity where even death held no power. In other

words, the people living here were not supposed to suffer… plus, didn't you mention that the Eternal City used to exist in space? An armory suggests the existence of a military force and a need for weapons. Who would the inhabitants of the Eternal City even fight in space?"

Sunny stared at him silently.

Naeve… was making a lot of sense.

To his disappointment.

Jet spoke at that moment:

"Still, that does not mean that there are no weapons in the Eternal City."

When Sunny looked at her with a silent question in his eyes, he smiled and shrugged.

"Well, think about it. If weapons were not used for war, then why would they be used?"

He tilted his head a little.

Was that a trick question? Where did people wield weapons except for the battlefield?

Training schools? Or…

His eyes glistened a little.

"Sports?"

Jet nodded.

"Yeah. People might become immortal, but some things never change."

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

Indeed, all he had to do to come up with this answer was ask himself where he had used weapons most often outside the usual battles. And

the answer was pretty simple — it was in the Dreamscape.

People were wired to enjoy conflict and competition, so sports thrived even in wartorn societies, but especially so in those that experienced long periods of peace.

In the waking world, the most popular sport was dueling, and since battles between Awakened were too dangerous, it mostly took place in the Dreamscape. Sunny knew better than most how popular these duels were, since he had suffered a lot of unintentional fame as Mongrel.

The same could be said about all cultures throughout Earth's history. The Dream Realm had not been an exception, either.

The immortals of the Eternal City would have been even more susceptible to the excitement offered by sports competitions, since they could not even kill each other. War had been impossible here — or at least meaningless — but the deeply rooted need to experience strife all people shared would have remained.

"But how am I supposed to find where… where sports competitions…"

Sunny fell silent.

'Wait a minute.'

Hadn't he already found one such place?

"The Hippodrome?"

Jet nodded.

"Chariot races were quite popular in ancient times. I would imagine something similar would have been happening here, as well, considering your description of the local hippodrome. Of course, the races themselves would have been different — with not only people, but also Beasts and Monsters participating, and everyone in the arena being immortal… gods, I would have bought a ticket if I could."

Sunny stared at her for a moment.

Instead of answering, he simply commanded his incarnation in the Hippodrome to separate itself from Saint, assume a tangible form, and descend to the floor of the arena.

Sunny extended his shadow sense into the ground, and immediately sensed hollow spaces there.

There was a whole network of service spaces under the Hippodrome: rooms for the athletes, stables, training halls, lounges…

And equipment storages, as well.

Once Sunny sensed what was hidden inside, his eyes glistened.

"Ah…"

He lingered for a bit, then looked at Jet with a bright smile.

"I think I've found the first part of that treasure."

Chapter-2649: Ancient Equipment

Without wasting any time, Sunny stepped through the shadow and found himself in a spacious corridor under the arena of the Hippodrome. Jet must have been correct in her assumption that mythical beasts had participated in the chariot races held in the Eternal City — the corridor was wide, with high ceilings, and the gates leading to various halls were quite large as well.

Sunny could easily imagine a lumbering creature, like the abominable silver tiger he had fought recently, walking on this path on its way to the arena.

For a moment, his spirit of exploration flared up, making him space out while imagining the exciting games that had happened in the Hippodrome… but Sunny was too preoccupied by something else to let himself go on a mental tangent, not to mention the fact that he was simultaneously controlling countless shades engaged in a fierce battle.

Walking over to a particular gate, he pushed it open.

Inside was a vast hall that must have served as a storage warehouse. The wares stored here were not of a mundane kind, though…

Instead, hundreds of suits of intricate armor were displayed on wooden mannequins. The walls were lined with stands that bristled with all kinds of fearsome weapons — spears, swords, axes, mauls, tridents, bows and arrows, javelins, glaives, halberds… anything he could imagine.

What was more, those were not ordinary suits of armor or ordinary weapons. Sunny had forged enough of them to know quality when he saw it — each was worthy of being worn or wielded by a

Transcendent being, at least. A few, those that were displayed on ornate pedestals, were even fit for a Supreme.

Both the armor and the weapons were enchanted, as well. Sunny could see a flowing weave of runes etched into the glistening steel, and although he could not tell what enchantments the runes created, he sensed dire power emanating from the ancient blades.

Everything here had been preserved in pristine condition, just like everything else in the Eternal City. At least a thousand sets of armor and twice as many weapons were stored in this hall alone… it was an arsenal that put the armories of Great Clans to shame.

Sunny was suddenly regretful that there were so few human shades in the Shadow Legion.

Should he have killed more people, maybe?

'No… probably not…'

But even if he could not bestow these armaments on most of his shades, there were plenty of warriors in the Human Domain who could benefit greatly from receiving such potent tools.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then walked over to a pedestal that stood in the very center of the armory, illuminated by an enchanted lantern. There, an imposing suit of lamellar armor that seemed to have been forged from beautiful nacre scales was resting on a mannequin, its head crowned by a laurel wreath. A fearsome spear rested nearby.

This set especially radiated a feeling of history and dire power. It had probably belonged to an immortal champion of the eternal arena… Sunny could not help but think that it would suit the shadow of Daeron quite well, at least during this expedition.

'It's a pity, though…'

Most of the shades Sunny commanded belonged to Nightmare Creatures, so these beautiful weapons and suits of armor were useless to them.

He still sent the entire arsenal into his Soul Sea, though. From there, the best equipment could be summoned to the human shades — Slayer, meanwhile, would receive full quivers of lethal enchanted arrows.

Sunny could not help but think that there had to be a similar arsenal meant for great beasts somewhere in the Hippodrome, too. He searched it with his shadow sense, but did not discover anything that resembled gargantuan suits of armor.

There was a different point of interest, though.

Stepping through the shadows, Sunny found himself in a different vast hall. There, enormous pools of something that looked like mercury were cut into the stone floor, surrounded by runic circles. Sunny studied the pools for a while, wondering what purpose they served.

He looked around the hall, then considered the layout of the underground complex hidden under the arena. Then, he walked over to one of the runic circles and stared at the runes.

"Form? Shape? Boundary? Hell, I can't make sense of it…"

He did have a strange suspicion, though, one that he felt had a good chance of reflecting the truth.

Eventually, Sunny stepped back and summoned one of the shades that were guarding the battlements into the underground hall. Soon, an enormous leopard appeared in front of him, towering at least a dozen meters above the floor. Unlike some of the shades, this one was not clad in armor forged by the shadow of the King of Swords, so it was a perfect choice to conduct an experiment.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then commanded the leopard to enter one of the pools.

The mercury rippled as the massive beast submerged itself into the pool. Shades did not need to breathe, of course, and the liquid metal did not seem dangerous… still, Sunny called the leopard back before too long.

As the giant shade rose from the mercury, torrents of liquid metal flowed down its black fur. However, not all of that metal returned into the pool — instead, a layer of it solidified around the body of the leopard.

Sunny's eyes trembled a little.

By the time the giant beast stepped back onto the cold stones, it was encased in polished armor. The mercury did not just solidify around it — instead, it was shaped and guided to turn into an actual suit of armor that was perfectly suited for the body of the bestial shade, protecting all its vital spots while leaving enough open areas not to compromise its mobility.

It was incredibly resilient, too — capable of withstanding most of Transcendent blades, at least... or Corrupted claws. Great Nightmare Creatures would not find it easy to break this armor, either.

As Sunny looked at the heavily armored black leopard, his eyes glistened.

"...That's what I'm talking about!"

Chapter-2650: Commerce and Culture

While the three strongholds of the Shadow Legion were besieged by the tide of hideous flesh, the Night Garden continued sailing toward the distant Lighthouse. Sunny had already begun arming his shades, but it was going to take some time to exhaust the pools of liquid metal and equip as many of them as he could.

He moved the shades that had already received shiny new coats of enchanted armor to the frontline, though, so the rate at which the Shadow Legion was suffering casualties was already reducing.

"It's amazing, really."

At the moment, Sunny and Jet were with the Saints of Night on the bridge of the living ship. He was showing them one of the weapons from the arsenal of the Hippodrome.

"I knew that there would be something of value in the Eternal City, but I might have underestimated just how much of a treasure trove this place is. It was inhabited by truly powerful beings, after all — and unlike most other places in the Dream Realm, everything here had been perfectly preserved. The Hippodrome alone can increase the overall strength of humanity by a noticeable margin."

Bloodwave nodded somberly, then said in his low voice:

"A thousand sets of Transcendent armor… all of House of Night only possessed a tenth of that. Not to mention Supreme relics."

There were more powerful Memories out there now that the number of Saints had increased, but it was still an incredible discovery. Even if the artifacts found in the Eternal City were not Memories, and were therefore more cumbersome to use, they were a precious commodity.

Not only because of their power, but also because of the fact that they were enchanted — and the fact that these enchantments had come from a previously unknown tradition. Just like Ananke's Mantle had helped Sunny develop his weaving, the runic enchantments of these ancient relics could help human enchanters learn more about sorcery, and therefore push their craft further.

Jet whistled, then asked:

"Where else do you think we'll be able to find something valuable?"

The Hippodrome was an unexpected find, but there were bound to be other similar places in the Eternal City.

Naeve contemplated for a while, then said tentatively:

"Stores? There had to be stores selling enchanted items. Even immortals would have enjoyed luxury… it would be even better to find workshops where the items were crafted."

At that moment, the usually quiet Aether suddenly spoke:

"Museums."

He glanced at Sunny and Jet, then added quietly:

"People who lived in this city were made immortal, but they had all come from somewhere. The wealth of history they had witnessed must have been immeasurable, and they would have brought mementos of that history here. Since they lived lives of opulence and luxury, knowing no need, they would have enjoyed culture more than commerce."

He smiled.

"Who knows what we will find in their museums? Relic of the Age of Gods, mythical weapons that decided the fate of entire realms… that is what one imagines when thinking about an immortal abode."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Museums, huh?'

Aether's suggestion was quite plausible, not to mention enticing.

Just then, an especially powerful abomination clashed with Slayer, and Sunny got distracted for a while. When the nightmarish horror was finally subdued, he shivered.

The more time Sunny spent in the Eternal City, the more a particular question gnawed at him.

Glancing at the Saints of Night, he exhaled slowly, and then asked:

"Now that I've enjoyed the sights of this lovely city, I wanted to ask. How… the hell did Nightwalker escape from here as a Sleeper?"

Naeve and Aether, in turn, looked at Bloodwave — the oldest of them, as well as the person who seemed to have known the legendary founder of the House of Night personally.

Bloodwave remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"That is Nightwalker you are talking about, the first of the Night Guides. That bastard could find any path and go anywhere he wanted, and nothing could stop him, let alone bar his way."

It sounded like Nightwalker had possessed an Aspect that had to do with getting places.

…It also sounded like Bloodwave had not been very fond of the mysterious founder of their clan, for some reason. Aether wore a neutral expression, while Naeve's emotions could not be read.

Sunny sighed.

"Well, I'm in no position to judge. Did you know? I once killed a Great Devil as a Sleeper…"

They chuckled politely, prompting his expression to fall.

'Ah. It is just not the same without Kai…'

Soon enough, he winced and raised a hand to shield his eyes.

The closer they got to the Lighthouse, the brighter their surroundings became. Most of the Eternal City was shrouded in nebulous darkness, with areas bathed in stark silver light — it was a city of endless night, alien to the concept of sunshine.

As they approached the lighthouse, however, it was easy to mistake the deep darkness of the undersea for daylight, and Sunny suspected that it would become even brighter as they got closer still.

The Lighthouse, just like the Wharf, was isolated from the rest of the city, standing some distance away from the nearest island. It was a magnificent tower that loomed above the landscape, almost reaching the sloping edge of the invisible dome. Brilliant light spilled from it, suffusing the clouds of vapor surrounding its base with blinding, soft radiance.

Sunny had felt nothing when nearing the Wharf, but the sight of the Lighthouse filled him with awe and dread in equal proportions.

He hesitated.

"I am not sure that we should take the Night Garden close to the tower."

Jet gave him a brief look and nodded.

"There is no dock, anyway. We will stop at a safe distance away."

Naeve seemed to agree, as well.

"How will we get to ground, though?"

That was indeed a good question.

Sunny looked at the turbulent expanse of glistening water and winced.

"I guess we're going for a swim…'

Chapter-2651: Spirit Attack

The Lighthouse was a place unlike any Sunny had ever seen, and it made him feel uncomfortable. The reason for his unease was simple — there were no shadows on the small island surrounding the great tower, and none within.

There were clouds of vapor swirling around the Lighthouse, and that vapor was suffused by the brilliant silver light. Every tiny droplet of water was reflecting the radiance, making the light omnidirectional — which meant that there was nowhere on the island where light was absent, and therefore no place for shadows to nestle.

So, Sunny could not use Shadow Step to travel there.

This was a new kind of obstacle for him. In fact, Sunny had not even been aware that his powers could be suppressed this way, so he was quite stumped. Luckily, he still possessed the Shadow Lantern, so returning to the Night Garden was not going to be a problem — but they would still have to brave the dark waters washing the shores of the Eternal City to reach the Lighthouse.

Unlike the Wharf, the Lighthouse was located inside Daeron's barrier. The Night Garden remained at a distance, drifting at the edge of the outer dome. It was decided that Aether would remain on the bridge of the living ship, controlling it, while the rest of them would proceed to the small island.

"What do you think is in the water?"

Sunny could not help but sound a little apprehensive.

Bloodwave shrugged.

"Whatever it is, we'll find out soon."

A few minutes later, they plunged into the cold water. An onyx serpent, an azure serpent, and a monstrous killer whale dove into the dark depths and rushed toward the radiant light, racing to get to the shore as fast as possible. Jet, meanwhile, had turned into a wraith and hid inside Sunny's maw.

Just moments after they plunged into the water, Sunny sensed that something was terribly wrong.

'Curses.'

He could feel the indestructible plates of the Jade Mantle slowly eroding away. Beside him, clouds of blood surrounded the enormous killer whale, and further away, Naeve's icy scales were becoming covered by a net of cracks.

'I see what is going on…'

There was no single harrowing abomination hiding in the waters of the Eternal City. Instead, there was an incalculable number of tiny fish, each no larger than a fingernail, hiding beneath the tumultuous surface of the dark water. The fish were small, but armed with countless razor-sharp teeth, swarming hungrily around any living thing that entered their hunting grounds.

Which was far worse. Sunny could handle a dreadful leviathan or two, but a myriad of tiny monsters…

Actually, he could handle that too.

Activating the Curse, he used the [Shadow Flame] and the [Weakening Curse] to affect a wide area around him, then channeled his Death Will while augmenting it with the [Mercy of Shadow]. He was empowering the shadowbound charm with the [Underworld Armament] and using it as a conduit for his Will — as a result, Sunny's killing intent became a lethal force.

Considering how many tiny abominations he was affecting, each individual one was not weakened that much by the [Weakening Curse]. However, they were all exposed to the same Death Will, and therefore…

They died.

Sunny willed it so, and an unimaginable number of tiny abominations were instantly killed. They sustained no wounds, and neither had they been exposed to an attack they could have resisted — the fragile flames of their lives were simply snuffed out.

They simply ceased.

Of course, it had only been possible because each individual fish was relatively weak. But, still… it was an eerie and indescribable feeling, to be able to decimate a myriad of abominations with a mere thought.

'I guess this can be called a spirit attack, since it was my Will that killed them…'

For a few moments, Sunny and the Saints of Night received reprieve from being gnawed on by the abominable creatures that populated the waters around the Eternal City.

But it was a place foreign to death, after all.

Soon enough, the tiny fiends Sunny had destroyed stirred and came back to life, swarming the two great sea serpents and the giant killer whale again. Blood spilled into the cold water once more — and Sunny willed them to die once more.

'Ah, this is…'

It was quite straining.

Sunny, Naeve, and Bloodwave fought their way through the infested waters while being eaten alive.

Luckily, Sunny could slow down the rate at which they were devoured, and the distance separating them from the small island was not too vast. Soon enough, they were surrounded by brilliant light, and could sense solid ground close by.

Sunny climbed onto the cold stones and swayed, blinded by the radiance. His shadow sense was useless here, and the light was

unbearably bright. Groaning, he shielded his eyes with a hand and jumped away from the water.

Jet assumed her corporeal form nearby, unperturbed and entirely dry. Naeve and Bloodwave joined them a few moments later, having already assumed their human forms — the former looked pale, but relatively unscathed, while the latter was riddled with ghastly wounds and bleeding heavily.

Looking down at his shredded armor, Bloodwave grimaced and wiped the blood off his face. His wounds were already closing, and he did not seem bothered by the pain. If anything, the flowing blood seemed to only make him more ferocious.

"No wonder those immortals are reluctant to fall into the water."

His tone was flat.

Sunny tended to agree. The waters of the Eternal City were teeming with these abominations, and their teeth were chillingly sharp. Usually, falling into infested waters would merely mean a swift and painful death… but things did not die in the Eternal City.

Once someone fell into the water here, they were destined to be devoured eternally, endlessly coming to life only to be pierced by tiny teeth and torn apart again, and again, and again… forever.

If there was a fate even Nightmare Creatures would be wary of, that was it.

He shuddered.

"Stay alert."

Stripped of shadow sense and surrounded by soft silver radiance, Sunny felt incredibly vulnerable and exposed. His expression darkened.

"We are inside the barrier, so there can be immortals here. In fact… let's hope that those fiends are the worst thing hiding in this light."

Despite how beautiful the diffused expanse of soft silver light was,

Sunny got an eerie feeling from this place.

Glancing at his companions, he summoned the Shadow Lantern and sighed.

"Let's go."

Chapter-2652: Hidden in the Light

The radiant vapor made it hard to see. It was bright enough to be blinding, and without shadows, discerning the shape and size of objects was surprisingly difficult. Jade and the Saints of Night seemed to be doing fine, but Sunny had to summon a small shadow out of the Shadow Lantern and manifest it into a mesh blindfold.

After tying it around his eyes, he finally felt better. Being unable to sense his surroundings still made him uneasy, but at least his vision was not severely impaired.

'It's better than true darkness, at least.'

If it had been elemental darkness, he would not have even been able to summon the shadows to help him in a moment of need.

Sunny, Jet, and the Saints of Night cautiously advanced forward. The island supporting the Lighthouse was not very big, but there was still some distance they had to traverse to reach the base of the tower. The ground gently sloped upward, and there was a set of wide steps they followed… soon enough, however, Sunny gestured for everyone to stop.

"What's wrong?"

He remained motionless for a few minutes, then hissed and took a step back. A strand of his wet hair fell to the ground, cut cleanly by something incredibly sharp.

There was also a deep cut on his forehead, just above his brow. Anybody else would have already been bleeding profusely, but of course, Sunny did not bleed… if he had been a bit taller, though, he would have lost an eye.

"There's something here."

Reaching forward, he felt the air carefully and then grasped an incredibly thin, razor-sharp wire strewn across the road. The wire was so fine that it would have been hard to notice even in normal circumstances, but in the blinding radiance that surrounded them, it was practically invisible.

When Sunny pulled on the wire, it glistened subtly, allowing his companions to see — they tensed a little and looked around, searching for other unseen threats.

"Proceed with caution."

There was another wire there, at the level of Sunny's knee. Bending a little, he stepped over it and continued forward with careful steps.

Their progress inevitably slowed.

There were more wires awaiting them ahead. The density increased gradually, until there was an entire razor-sharp, invisible fence blocking the road. There were also other traps hidden in the blinding radiance — sharp spikes that protruded from the ground, thin blades embedded into the stone, nets that glistened subtly in the air…

Sunny and his companions avoided them without much trouble, but anything larger than a human would have had trouble ascending the slopes of the island toward the Lighthouse — not that it mattered much, considering that the horrors of the Eternal City were immortal.

The wires and traps forced Sunny to search for alternative paths, though. He could have destroyed them, of course, but there was no telling what that would cause. Traps were often triggered by such actions, after all, not to mention primitive alarm systems.

In the end, they had to circle almost the entire island before finding a way up. The Lighthouse island was eerily quiet and empty, and they did not meet a single enemy while exploring its mysterious shores — however, Sunny stopped once again only a few hundred meters later.

They were still surrounded from all sides by hazy radiance, the vapor feeling refreshingly cool on their faces. He peered into the silver light

somberly.

"Can you hear it?"

They did. A strange, quiet, eerie sound was resounding from the radiant haze ahead, as if something was scraping against the stone.

Sunny and his companions advanced cautiously, preparing themselves for battle.

They were not prepared for what they found ahead, though.

"What… the hell?"

Out there, in front of them, a gruesome body was impaled by six short, sharp steel spikes. The person had their limbs and head severed, and then arranged on the ground like a macabre display. The torso, the arms, the legs, and the head were each pierced by a spike and held in place by them.

The worst part of it all…

Was that the body was still alive.

It moved weakly, trying to free itself of the spikes, and thin tendrils of flesh were reaching toward the severed parts, as if wanting to reunite with them. It was the struggles of the severed body that produced the scraping noise.

The face was covered by a bloody cloth, but they could see its lips moving under the fabric.

Sunny shuddered in revolution.

"What is this?"

Naeve's voice trembled.

Sunny remained silent for a few long moments, then said in a subdued tone:

"This… is the danger of immortality."

Indeed, the grotesque body laying on the ground in front of them belonged to one of the fallen immortals of the Eternal City. Someone had left the abomination here, severed and immobilized — perhaps to restrain them, perhaps as a punishment.

In any case, Sunny had no desire to free that monstrosity from the spikes.

After studying the impaled immortal for a bit, they carefully moved around the ghastly body and continued forward.

As Sunny and his companions ascended higher, they witnessed a few more similar scenes. Here and there, the fallen immortals were displayed like trophies, weakly trying to set themselves free. Some were nailed to the ground like the first one, some were impaled on tall spikes, some crucified or suspended in nets of razor-sharp wide…

Some still looked like humans, while some were no more than abhorrent masses of slithering flesh. There was even a head of a giant bull that was held in place by thick silver chains, its enormous glassy eyes staring at them with hunger and fury. The tongue of the ghastly creature was moving, but its body was nowhere to be seen.

The further Sunny went, the darker his mood became.

'...Just what has happened on this island?'

After circling the Lighthouse a few more times and discovering half a dozen cruelly restrained immortals, they approached the great tower.

And there, on its steps…

They finally found an immortal who was not restrained.

Chapter-2653: Modern History

Stone steps revealed themselves from the blinding radiance, with tall pillars framing their flawless surface. They ascended steeply into the silver haze, disappearing into the brilliant light like the pathway to heaven…

There was nothing heavenly about them, though, because not a hundred meters lower down the slope, a horrid mass of vivisected flesh was slithering and straining as it tried to escape the wires that bound it and the spikes that impaled it.

The Lighthouse was obscured by the radiance, but it was near, looming in the haze.

A young man was sitting on the steps, staring at the ground. As Sunny and his companions approached, he slowly raised his head and peered at them with his strange, nebulous silver eyes.

The youth looked barely old enough to be called an adult, with beautiful features and dark, flawless skin. He wore a tunic woven out of flowing, luxurious fabric, and his long hair was tied neatly by a piece of metal wire.

As he regarded them with a hollow look, a strange, ominous smile twisted his lips.

Hearing the nauseating sounds of rippling flesh behind them, Sunny tensed and readied himself…

The youth opened his mouth.

What escaped it were not revolting tendrils of flesh, however.

They were the familiar sounds of the human language, instead:

"Kid… is that you? Gods. You look old."

Sunny froze.

Jet seemed stunned and confused, too. Naeve's expression was hard to read, while Bloodwave remained his usual grim, nonchalant self.

Staring at the young man somberly, he pursed his lips, and then said in his low voice:

"So you're alive after all, scoundrel."

The youth studied Bloodwave for a while, not saying anything, then looked behind him.

"Where is Knossos? Where is Typhaon?"

'Wait a minute…'

Sunny blinked and then peered into the soul of the young man. To his surprise, there was no darkness inside it — just the pure, radiant light of a Transcendent soul core.

Bloodwave shrugged.

"Dead."

The youth fell silent. A few moments passed, and then he chuckled.

"What kind of Nightmare Creature managed to do those two in?"

Naeve spoke at that moment, his voice sounding a little hoarse:

"It wasn't a Nightmare Creature. It was the Prince of Nothing."

The young man frowned slightly.

"Who the hell is the Prince of Nothing?"

Naeve sighed.

"Mordret of Nowhere. The banished son of the King of Swords."

The young man blinked a couple of times.

"Who the hell is… wait, Anvil? Warden's boy?"

Naeve nodded silently.

The youth studied him for a bit, and then raised an eyebrow.

"I see. And who might you be?"

Naeve stared at him somberly, not saying anything.

Sunny, who had been listening to their conversation silently, chose that moment to speak. He already suspected who the strange youth was, but wanted to confirm it — so, glancing between Naeve and the young man, he asked in a bewildered tone:

"Is someone going to do the introductions?"

Naeve smiled slightly.

"Sure. These are Soul Reaper and the Lord of Shadows."

He gestured to the youth.

"And this is Nightwalker, the founder of our fallen clan. I am glad to see you too… father."

***

Sunny was still digesting the fact that Nightwalker, the legendary and mysterious founder of the House of Nigh, was not only alive… but also his buddy Naeve's absent dad.

The fact that Nightwalker looked a couple of decades younger than his son was not helping him come to terms with that information, either.

'At least I know why Bloodwave doesn't like his clan's founder very much, now… the bastard got his older sister pregnant...'

For all the talk about how the House of Night was not a single family, but an alliance of prominent Legacy Clans of the Stormsea instead,

their familial relationships seemed quite complicated.

Sunny sighed.

After the brief introduction, Nightwalker rose and invited them to follow him. They walked up the stone steps, heading for the Lighthouse — or one of the buildings surrounding it, at least.

"So. Can someone catch me up on what has been happening in the world? I am quite curious."

Sunny gave him a long look, and, since no one volunteered to speak, said in a neutral tone:

"Let's see…"

When was it that Nightwalker had gone missing, again?

Actually, nobody outside the House of Night really knew.

"A Category Five Nightmare Gate opened in America, so we lost that side of the planet. Immortal Flame and his daughter died there, as well. Broken Sword and his cohort conquered the Third Nightmare. Then, they conquered the Fourth Nightmare and became Supremes. Then, Broken Sword was killed by his companions, and they divvied up the world."

Nightwalker whistled quietly.

"So they are Supremes now, huh? Actually… so there are Supremes now, huh?"

Sunny glanced at him.

"There are seven Supremes, although three of them are already dead. Well... four, technically. Anyway — Valor, Song, and the House of Night established themselves as the Great Clans. Broken Sword's daughter got lost in the Dream Realm for a couple of years, then conquered the Second Nightmare as a Sleeper. Antarctica got swallowed by Nightmare Gates… that's one less continent, again. Your son was there, by the way, risking his life to evacuate the civilians."

Jet smiled lazily.

"I was there, as well."

Nightwalker studied her with interest.

No, actually…

'Why is that bastard leering at Jet?'

Nightwalker smiled.

"I assume that you are the Soul Reaper. Nice to meet you, young lady."

Jet chuckled pleasantly.

"Please call me Jet, mister."

Sunny stared at them, appalled.

He coughed.

"As I was saying… millions of mundane people settled in the Dream Realm. A few years later, Valor and Song went to war. The House of Night attempted to maintain neutrality, but in the end, most of its elders were killed by Mordret, and all of its Citadels were usurped."

Nightwalker's smile dimmed.

"...One man defeated my entire house?"

He turned to Naeve and Bloodwave with a somber expression.

Naeve gritted his teeth.

"That thing can hardly be called a man."

Nightwalker remained silent for a long while, then sighed and looked away.

"Ah, I remember now. That boy was given to the Dreamspawn. It makes sense, then."

His voice sounded neither somber nor cheerful, just… distant. As if he was talking about the past he had left behind.

Sunny shifted slightly.

'The Dreamspawn again...'

So Mordret had not lied.

Nightwalker and Asterion really did have a history...

Chapter-2654: Family Reunion

Sunny studied the back of the young man who was old enough to be his grandfather, wondering what had happened between Nightwalker and Asterion — and when.

He was full of questions, but knew that it was not the time to ask them yet. The questions still struggled to climb onto his tongue, though, which made him feel itchy.

Sunny was also controlling the besieged Shadow Legion, repelling the harrowing onslaught of the grotesque army of immortals, so there was that as well.

He squinted.

"Weren't you a Master?"

Nightwalker looked at him, then smiled wryly.

"I found a Seed of Nightmare here in the Eternal City. Took me a… few tries, but I conquered it eventually."

'A... few tries?'

Overwhelmed by the implications of these simple words, Sunny briefly wondered who had done it first — Broken Sword and his cohort or Nightwalker.

Perhaps it did not matter, in the end.

He sighed.

"Anyway, in the war between Valor and Song… neither Valor nor Song won. Broken Sword's daughter won, instead, killing both Anvil and Ki Song — with the help of an extremely dashing sellsword. Who then betrayed her and was promptly killed, as well. They're dating

now."

Nightwalker slowed down and turned, giving him an incredulous look.

Strangely enough, Naeve and Bloodwave stared at him with wide eyes, too.

"Wait… you and Lady Nephis… are together?"

Sunny gave them a dark look.

"Oh, did I not mention it? There's no need to sound so shocked, you know. Yes, we are."

He grinned.

"We're like two sides of the same coin, she and I."

Nightwalker stared at him for a moment, then looked at Jet. Then, he smiled.

"Good for you."

Sunny tilted his head, suddenly feeling his smile growing strained.

"Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan — Changing Star — attained Supremacy and became the ruler of humanity. Earth is being slowly devoured by the Dream Realm, so hundreds of millions of people are being resettled to the Dream Realm ahead of the apocalypse. We almost lost the Eastern Quadrant to a Great Terror recently, but a new Supreme ascended and took care of it. That pretty much covers everything. Oh… the remains of the House of Night were absorbed into the government. Saint Jet is the de facto leader of the government, as well as the new captain of the Night Garden."

Nightwalker looked at Jet once again, then glanced at Naeve and Bloodwave. His expression grew distant for a short while, but cleared eventually.

"Good to know."

He studied Sunny silently.

"Naeve and Bloodwave are members of the House of Night, while the beautiful young lady is the captain of the Night Garden. But who are you, kid? Did someone find Shadow God's lineage, after all?"

Sunny smiled.

"...Someone did."

He paused for a moment.

"I am Supreme Sunless, the demigod in charge of conquering this city. I am also thousands of years old, so please refrain from calling me kid… young man."

Nightwalker stared at him with no particular expression on his youthful face, then looked away and sighed.

"The world has changed a lot since I've been gone."

He walked forward without saying anything else until a wall built of large stone blocks revealed itself from the radiance. Opening the door, Nightwalker walked inside and invited them in.

The space inside might have been a storage area once, but it had been turned into a makeshift living space now. There was a luxurious bed, paintings and statuettes decorating the haphazard collection of furniture, and several braziers with cold coals in them. There were also weapons and various tools littering the floor, with large spools of metal wire and long spikes leaning against the walls.

It seemed like Nightwalker both lived and prepared his traps here. If anything, this place resembled Sunny's room in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City more than anything else.

Most importantly, though, was that there were shadows here. Bright light spilled through the small window near the roof, but most of the storage space was mercifully dark, soothing Sunny's strained eyes.

Walking inside, he let out a relieved sigh and pulled the blindfold off. He felt like a fish thrown back into the water.

Curiously enough, Sunny had not sensed these shadows from the outside. It was only when he crossed the threshold that he felt their presence, hinting that this building — and maybe the Lighthouse, as well — were able to suppress anyone from peering through their walls.

"Make yourself at home."

Nightwalker walked over to one of the braziers and made fire. Then, he looked around with a slightly lost expression.

"Sorry… I don't think I have any food or beverages to offer you. I don't actually remember the last time I ate something."

In the silence that followed, Naeve sighed and asked the question that had been on all of their minds from the moment they met the miraculously surviving founder of the House of Night:

"You… you are one of those immortals now, aren't you?"

Nightwalker regarded him with a neutral expression.

"Aren't we all immortal here, in the Eternal City?"

He shrugged, and then sat down in a decadently opulent chair.

"But yes… the answer to your question is yes. I died here. And then, the Eternal City brought me back. So, I am one of its immortals now."

Naeve drew a shaky breath.

"But you are not corrupted, like the rest of them?"

Nightwalker shook his head slowly.

"No… not yet, at least. In fact, none of the immortals are corrupted."

Sunny frowned.

"I'll have to disagree."

Naeve nodded.

"Indeed. We've seen them… Jet and the Lord of Shadows fought them, as well. How can those abominations not be corrupted?"

Nightwalker lingered for a moment.

"Ah, sorry. I should rather say that the abominations you've faced are not the immortals."

He leaned back and sighed.

"The actual immortals aren't really alive anymore. Their bodies are intact and their souls are intact, but their minds have long crumbled. They are like empty dolls with nothing inside… well, at least there wasn't anything inside them, initially."

Nightwalker looked at them darkly.

"That was before a certain Nightmare Creature came to the Eternal City, crawled into them, and rooted itself within their immortal bodies. So, the things that you saw and fought is that Nightmare Creature wearing the bodies of the immortals. It's a parasite."

Sunny frowned.

"I don't suppose you know what that Nightmare Creature is called?"

Nightwalker turned to him and smiled.

"Oh, of course I do."

His smile dimmed, and was then erased from his face.

"It's called the Flesh of Kanakht."

Chapter-2655: Cursed King

Hearing Nightwalker's words, Sunny frowned.

"Kanakht… I've heard that name before."

Jet had fought a Great Devil named the Heart of Kanakht, as well as several lesser abominations bearing similar names. According to Cassie, he had been a cursed king whose parts were kept apart to prevent him from coming back to life. More importantly, Eurys had mentioned an individual called Kanakht once, when talking about those cursed by Shadow God.

Considering how many traces of Kanakht were left in the Dream Realm, he must have been quite powerful. And considering the nature of these traces, he must have been quite sinister.

Now, they were facing a Great Terror born of the same source — a being of the same caliber as Skinwalker.

"Who the hell is Kanakht, though?"

Nightwalker smiled wryly.

"Just an old myth."

He hesitated for a short while, then sighed.

"He was supposedly one of the first humans, born at the dawn of the Age of Gods. Gods and deities walked the earth back then, battling Void Creatures and their spreading Corruption — they brushed sides with humans quite often, as well, to various results. Most of those encounters were benign in nature, but not all of them. Kanakht in particular managed to anger Shadow God, somehow, so Shadow God took his shadow away… and with it, his ability to die."

Sunny scratched his head.

"Doesn't sound like much of a punishment."

In a sense, he was the opposite of Kanakht — Sunny had more shadows than he knew what to do with. One was cursed by Shadow God, the other received Shadow God's blessing.

…The latter could be said about Sunny and Eurys, as well.

Nightwalker grinned.

"A very topical remark, considering where we are."

He fell silent for a moment.

"Gods have their own views on things, I guess. In any case, Kanakht did not seem to mind the curse of Shadow God. Eventually, he established a vast kingdom and ruled it for countless generations, defending his people with his overwhelming power. His power was so great, in fact, that people started calling him a god."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"But?"

Nightwalker shrugged.

"But Kanakht didn't just want to be called a god, he wanted to be a god."

Sunny leaned against a wall and crossed his arms.

"Ah. That troublesome thing, Apotheosis."

Nightwalker stared at him blankly.

"A what? Apotheosis? Oh… I guess the word fits."

Sunny had to remind himself that the man had been gone for decades. Even the existence of Supremes was news to him — naturally, he would not know about the impenetrable barrier that prevented them from climbing higher on the Path of Ascension.

He shook his head.

"Anyway, so what happened?"

Nightwalker answered in a neutral tone:

"No matter what Kanakht tried, he could not step over the threshold of divinity — not without a shadow, at least. He became obsessed with the idea of godhood, and his kingdom gradually became a dark and nightmarish place. People who used to venerate and worship him were now full of terror and hatred for the undying monster who ruled them, and entire generations disappeared into the ghastly cauldron of his obsession. They could not do anything to free themselves, though. After all, Kanakht's power was overwhelming, and he could not be killed."

He leaned forward a little.

"They did manage to topple his throne in the end, still. Kanakht's body was severed from his soul and spirit, cut into pieces, and all these parts were sealed separately in various places, never to be reunited. The end."

Sunny stared at him incredulously.

"It's obviously not the end, though?"

Nightwalker smiled.

"Well, I assume those seals were guarded by someone. However, the guardians all perished when the Dream Realm was consumed by Corruption. The seals weakened after a while, and the same Corruption took hold of the severed remains of Kanakht. Those pieces eventually became horrid abominations."

He fell silent for a while, then added in a somber tone:

"I only know about this because I had the misfortune of visiting the kingdom of Kanakht in one of my Nightmares. The interesting part, however, is not what he did to earn the curse of Shadow God, and not what happened to his severed parts. It is not even what will happen if those parts fuse back together one day."

Nightwalker leaned back.

"The interesting part is how Kanakht was overthrown… and why."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?

Nightwalker lingered for a few moments.

"The being who helped the enslaved people of Kanakht's kingdom get rid of him was none other than the Demon of Repose, who happened to pass nearby. As for why she decided to help them… according to the myth, it was because after countless years of searching, Kanakht finally found a way to become a god despite being disqualified from achieving divinity the usual way."

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

He remained silent for a few moments, then leaned forward.

"He found an alternative way to achieve Apotheosis? How?"

Nightwalker studied him a bit, then shrugged.

"I am not entirely sure, but apparently, he was planning to consume his own kingdom, complete with every person living there. So, not the best role model, as far as kingship goes."

He gave Sunny a curious glance.

"If only that poor fool lived in the age where the Nightmare Spell existed, huh? All that nonsense could have been avoided."

Nightwalker fell silent for a while, then asked:

"You told me that the first Supremes emerged decades ago, right?"

Sunny nodded.

"Around twenty-five years ago, yes."

Nightwalker looked away with a pensive expression.

"How come none of them challenged the Fifth Nightmare, then?"

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"I guess it's because one of them is stuck on the Moon, while the other two were misguided, afraid, and had too much to lose."

Nightwalker looked at him directly.

"What about you? Are you not misguided and afraid? Do you have nothing to lose?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"Me? No. And I am in a completely different situation than they were."

He looked at Nightwalker and said in an even tone:

"Because of the decades they wasted, I am not afforded the luxury of having a choice. The end of days is not on the horizon anymore — it is already in progress. So it's become Sacred or die… or at least watch everything I treasure die."

Sunny sighed.

"That is the reason why I'm here, in the Eternal City. Conquering this place is a part of the process."

Chapter-2656: Dubious Conquest

Nightwalker studied him for a long while with the same strangely distant expression he had worn previously, then smiled faintly.

"Conquering the Eternal City? I am not going to diminish your accomplishments… getting to the Lighthouse unscathed must have already been difficult enough. Well done. However, you should have noticed that this place is populated by a myriad of immortal abominations. Surely, your goal is a tad too ambitious?"

Sunny gave him a nonchalant shrug.

"Personally, I think it's just ambitious enough."

Jet chuckled.

"You must not have witnessed the power of a Supreme before, mister. It is quite daunting. And that guy is not just any Supreme, at that — he's someone who became Supreme by killing the person who sat on the throne before him, which puts him in an entirely different category."

She smiled.

"I wouldn't have brought the Night Garden here if I wasn't reasonably confident in his ability to keep his promises. Despite how he looks, he's quite reliable."

Sunny gave her a silent stare.

"Huh? What's wrong with how I look?"

Not getting an answer, he frowned and looked back at Nightwalker.

"She's right. My forces have already secured the Wharf and the island it is connected to. Currently, we are engaged in a battle for the three islands north of that. I expect the siege to come to a conclusion in a few hours, which would allow us to advance further, into the heart of the city."

Nightwalker studied him with interest.

"Really? How are you dealing with the immortals, then?"

Sunny gave him an even look.

"I am putting them to sleep. Although now that I know what hides in the water, I am thinking of just tossing them into the waves."

Nightwalker shook his head slowly.

"That won't work."

Sunny was a little disappointed.

"Why?"

The lost founder of the House of Night let out a heavy sigh, as if recalling his own disastrous attempt to do just that.

"As I said, the immortals are merely shells for the parasite that controls them. So, you can indeed get rid of them by throwing them into the water — some would climb out, but most would become an endless source of sustenance for the little critters there. However…"

His expression darkened.

"A parasite is a parasite. Once one host becomes useless, it will find another — and with countless abominations populating the depths, the Flesh of Kanakht would have countless new hosts to infect. Once thousands of those fishes start mutating, sprouting tendrils, and climbing ashore… you'll regret having fed them an immortal or two in the past. Believe me."

He shivered.

Sunny was quite uneasy, as well. He hummed, then mumbled quietly:

"Wow. I never thought that one day I'd be happy to only be fighting the human vessels of an immortal Great Terror…"

His expression twisted a little.

"Flesh of Kanakht is a Great Terror, right?"

He had assumed so because the fallen immortals wielded power similar to that of Great Nightmare Creatures. Considering that Nightwalker did not mention any kind of source creature or a Cursed abomination controlling them, the Flesh of Kanakht did not seem like a Tyrant. As for being a Titan… it could be one, but Sunny would have expected more trouble when facing a creature like that.

'As if fighting a city full of immortal Great Ones is not trouble enough!'

Nightwalker nodded.

"I would expect so."

He studied Sunny intensely, then shifted slightly.

"Well… I guess you really do have a chance to conquer this hell. Unbelievable."

His expression turned wistful for a brief moment.

"And there I was, feeling proud of myself for becoming a Transcendent…"

At that moment, Naeve, who had been silent before, finally spoke:

"The Flesh of Kanakht is not our only problem."

Nightwalker gave him a curious look.

"Oh?"

Naeve hesitated a little, then nodded.

"The Dutchman is also here."

Nightwalker's eyes widened a little.

"That thing? It followed you to the Eternal City?"

The House of Night had never engaged in a serious battle against the Dutchman, but having traveled the misty waters of the Stormsea for decades, they had known about the existence of the wraith armada from various chilling encounters and sightings long before this expedition. Nightwalker probably knew more than most.

Sunny shrugged.

"It's more like we followed it here. It doesn't matter who arrived first, though, only who will be the one to leave when all is said and done. Jet here is a specialist in disposing of troublesome wraiths. In fact, she's somewhat of a wraith herself."

Jet smiled.

"When I'm in the mood."

Nightwalker chuckled. Then, however, his expression slowly grew serious.

A heavy silence settled in the room. Sunny studied Nightwalker and Naeve, wondering why their reunion was so… reserved. The former seemed too aloof, while the latter was seemingly holding himself back.

But neither displayed any noticeable sense of joy.

Perhaps they were simply too shocked to feel anything easily defined yet. Perhaps they had never had a joyful kind of relationship, to begin with.

He hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"If I may ask… how did you end up stuck in this city, Nightwalker? Better yet, how did you manage to get here alone, as a mere Ascended?"

The corner of Nightwalker's mouth twitched.

"Mere Ascended, huh?"

He remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Who said that I was alone?"

Sunny frowned.

"That was the impression I got after learning about your disappearance from Naeve and Bloodwave."

Nightwalker shook his head.

"I wasn't alone. I was accompanied by that kid, Asterion, and his followers."

Sunny winced.

"I'd appreciate it if you would not mention his name."

Nightwalker grinned.

"Oh, I would be happy too. I don't particularly like mentioning him either."

At that moment, Jet asked in a confused tone:

"Why would you take him with you instead of forming an expedition from the champions of the House of Night? And why did you leave the Night Garden behind?"

Nightwalker smiled.

"That's simple. Because I did not want to lose the Night Garden, and I did not want my people to die. Plus… you said that you are putting the immortals to sleep? I was planning to do something similar — fighting them physically is useless, so I needed someone with a powerful Aspect that allowed them to perform mental attacks. Such people are rare, and that kid seemed like a good candidate, being the successor of Heart God and all."

His expression darkened.

Nightwalker remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a cold tone:

"...Of course, I did not expect that the bastard would kill me as soon as we reached the city and he didn't need me anymore."

Chapter-2657: Gift of Empathy

Naeve paled visibly when he heard Nightwalker's admission. Even Bloodwave, who had maintained a stoic expression, scowled deeply. Jet frowned, as well… but Sunny did not show much of a reaction.

After all, he already suspected that something of the kind had happened.

However, behind his mask of nonchalance, he was a little… excited.

Perhaps it was a bit callous of him, to feel thrilled about Asterion's betrayal and subsequent murder of Nightwalker — an act that might have prevented the House of Night from nurturing a Sovereign of their own, eventually — but he was simply glad to finally meet someone who knew about the Dreamspawn's powers firsthand and was willing to share that knowledge.

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Mental attacks? What is his Aspect, exactly?"

Nightwalker gave him a look of indignation.

"That is what you chose to ask about? Really?"

Sunny stared at him with a deadpan expression.

"Yes."

Nightwalker laughed.

"Are all Supremes this… never mind. I'm not one to judge."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, prompting Bloodwave to speak gruffly:

"You know how no one knows much about Nightwalker? That is not

because of his elusive and mysterious nature. He simply used to avoid everyone — his closest allies included — as much as possible… because he hates people. He has always been a reclusive, antisocial bastard."

Nightwalker grinned.

"True. It's not my fault that people are so hateful, though, is it?"

Shaking his head, he added:

"And considering how I ended up, I'd say that I had not avoided people enough."

Nightwalker fell silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"Regardless, to answer your question… he's a mind reader."

Sunny's eyebrows flew up.

"A mind reader? What do you mean?"

Nightwalker brushed his face tiredly.

"The Dreamspawn… the last survivor of the Path of Ascension cult. He is a mind reader — although he did not start out as one."

Sunny and Jet glanced at each other.

[Cassie, are you hearing this?]

He only had to wait a few moments before the answer came.

[Yes.]

Nightwalker, meanwhile, continued:

"His Dormant Ability allowed him to sense the emotions of other living beings. He was an… empath, of sorts. His Awakened Ability is a bit sinister — it allows him to feed on the powerful emotions of others, consuming them. It was his Ascended Ability that made me take him to the Eternal City, however. That one allowed him to influence the emotions of others with his own."

His expression grew somber.

"His Abilities underwent a bit of an evolution when he Ascended, though. The scope of his Dormant Ability increased to include not only emotions, but also the thoughts of others. And his Ascended Ability was the same — it allowed him to put his thoughts into other people's heads."

Nightwalker grimaced.

"He had always been a creepy kid, and these three powers made being in his company even creepier. Because even with fearsome mental defenses, you never could be quite sure that your thoughts and emotions were your own. Even if they were, you knew that he could read you like an open book. That made being around him uncomfortable… or it would have, if he did not know just the right words to say to put people at ease."

Nightwalker chuckled bitterly.

"He was capable, effortlessly charming, devilishly smart… and strong. Really strong. But despite all that, you could not help but feel a little uneasy around him, from time to time. Because once in a while, for a brief moment, it felt like there was something deeply wrong about him, hiding in the depths of his eyes. Ah, but of course, that feeling was easy to explain by the prejudice everyone had about him."

Nightwalker shrugged.

"After all, he was a stranger. Someone from outside the bounds of the world we were familiar with. Those Path of Ascension zealots had always been a weird bunch, and nobody knew what happened to them in the Dream Realm. So, it was difficult not to feel distrustful of that kid… that's how others felt, at least. Personally, I didn't care too much."

His smile turned a little bitter.

"Maybe I should have."

Sunny, meanwhile, was thinking about Asterion's Aspect.

'Empath, mind reader, mental manipulator… and what does it mean, he consumed other people's emotions? Was he like an energy vampire?"

He remained silent for a while, then could not help but ask a senseless question:

"What about his Transcendent Ability? What about his Domain?"

Nightwalker gave him a confused look.

"How should I know? He was a… mere... Ascended the last time I saw him."

Sunny grimaced.

"Right."

After pausing for a moment, he asked:

"So what did he want to find here, in the Eternal City? And why did he turn on you?"

Nightwalker scratched the back of his head.

"What he wanted to find here… I am not sure, since everything he had told me turned out to be a lie. No matter what it was, though, he must have failed to find it. You see, we were too weak, he and I. All we knew about this place was what I had seen here as a Sleeper, so we might have overestimated ourselves and underestimated the Eternal City. What could two Masters do here, really? He was already lucky to escape alive."

Nightwalker looked at Sunny with a dark expression.

"As to why he turned on me — perhaps that was his main goal all along. I did not think that it was possible, but he wanted to absorb the lineage of Storm God. Divine lineages can't coexist with each other, but when it comes to the Dreamspawn, they somehow can… even if I learned it too late."

His silver eyes glistened dangerously.

"He could have entered the Lighthouse and attempted to receive the lineage like I had done once, a long time ago, but he chose to stab me in the back instead. To his credit, I don't think that he was aiming to kill me. But I was too stubborn to surrender, so in the end, he did."

Nightwalker sighed.

"It was a hollow end… to survive all the horrors of the Nightmare Spell only to die by a human's hand"

Saying that, he looked away and added in a distant tone:

"And it was a bitter beginning, to come back to life in this cursed city, knowing that I am destined to die here thousands of times more."

Chapter-2658: Tempered Blade

Sunny looked around, noting the spools of razor-sharp wire and steel spikes. Remembering the grotesque scenes hiding in the beautiful radiance of the Lighthouse island, he felt a chill running down his spine and asked in a neutral tone:

"So that is how you spent these decades? Escaping the immortals and building traps to keep them away from your hideout?"

Nightwalker regarded him silently for a long while, then smiled.

"I don't remember."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"You… don't remember?"

Nightwalker chuckled.

"Well, I remember this and that. In the beginning, I was an Ascended… life was hard. Those abominations were simply too overwhelming, so I died a lot. Sometimes, I managed to escape. Most times, I did not. And eventually, I went mad — I don't recall what happened after that clearly."

Relaxing in his chair, he shrugged.

"But I regained my senses after a while. And then, I lost my mind again — and then, I found it again. Time lost all meaning. I would not have known that I have been here for decades instead of centuries or thousands of years if you had not told me."

His expression grew distant and detached.

"At some point, I found a Seed of Nightmare. There's a few here, in the Eternal City, but I could only get close to one. I challenged it and

died. The city brought me back to life, so I challenged it again. Eventually, I conquered it and became a Transcendent. Things did not get easy after that, but they did become easier. At least I could fight the immortals, finally."

Nightwalker smiled, and something dark and dangerous gleamed in his eyes.

"So that was what I've been doing for the last… ten years, I guess? Fighting Great Nightmare Creatures all day, every day. To kill time."

It was at this point that Sunny realized two chilling facts.

The first fact… was that the amicable youth in front of him was not just a legendary figure from the early years of the Nightmare Spell — an outstanding, but antiquated person whose achievements had been swallowed by the passage of time. No, Nightwalker was something else.

He was the most dangerous Saint in the world, by far.

'Ten years, he says…'

If Nightwalker had been battling Great Nightmare Creatures tirelessly for a decade — as a mere Transcendent, no less — then he had accumulated more combat experience than every other Saint combined. These ten years were a harrowing crucible capable of forging a blade so terrifying that no other weapon could ever withstand its sharp edge.

Nightwalker had already been one of the most accomplished warriors of the most ill-fated generation in history before returning to the Eternal City and Transcending. Now, he would be a monster.

And the second fact…

Was that Nightwalker was either the most insane Awakened in the world… or the most sane one.

Sunny was not sure which statement was true.

The young man seemed composed enough, which could mean that he

was either completely unhinged and hiding it well, or had somehow managed to preserve his sanity despite experiencing long years of complete isolation and a myriad of gruesome deaths without allowing his mind to shatter completely.

In any case…

'I want to recruit him.'

Sunny's eyes glistened.

He had come to the Eternal City to find treasure… and he felt like he had just found it.

The perfectly preserved arsenal of powerful enchanted weapons was a good discovery, but this one man was worth far more. In a world falling into the hungry maw of apocalypse, an exceptional champion like that was a priceless commodity.

Nightwalker shifted uncomfortably under his gaze and coughed.

"That, uh… if you keep looking at me like that, you'll make me blush."

Sunny smiled slowly.

"All day, every day, you say? Must have been fun."

Nightwalker gave him a surprised look.

"Well… I wouldn't call it fun, personally. But actually, it wasn't too bad."

He smiled.

"As Bloodwave mentioned, I am not very fond of people. Why would I spend most of my life wandering the sea otherwise? So, on one hand, spending all these years in a city populated only by Nightmare Creatures was a bit of a chore. But, on the other hand... I enjoyed the peace and quiet."

Sunny could not help but let out a scoff.

'This guy… I like him.'

At that moment, Nightwalker turned his smile to Jet and winked.

"Of course, there's an exception to every rule. I am actually fond of some instances of human companionship quite a lot."

'I should probably kill that guy.'

Ah, damnation! Nightwalker was immortal here, in the Eternal City.

Leaning forward a little, Sunny asked in a pleasant tone:

"Saint Nightwalker… how would you like to get out of the Eternal City and return to the surface world?"

Nightwalker looked at him in confusion.

"Saint? That's a bit weird. Believe me, I am no saint."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Oh, right.'

Nightwalker was probably old enough to be his grandfather.

"That's what we call Transcendents. Akin to Masters."

Nightwalker tilted his head a little.

"Saints? Huh. Well… I guess it has a ring to it. Yeah. I like it."

Smiling, he inhaled deeply and looked into the distance.

"Of course, I would love nothing more than to leave this cursed place. But it's not that easy."

Sunny shook his head.

"Actually, it is. I can send you back right now."

All he had to do was ask Nephis to open a Dream Gate in front of the Lighthouse. That would involve quite a bit of risk, of course, but it

was possible.

Nightwalker shook his head.

"No, you don't understand. I simply can't leave. Once you die in the Eternal City, you become its prisoner — for as long as it exists. And it is, you know… eternal."

He chuckled quietly.

"Why do you think Repose created this place? Did you think that she wanted to create a peaceful paradise for virtuous creatures to enjoy for all eternity?"

He shook his head with a twisted smile.

"No. The Demon of Repose… she was a complete psychopath, that one. What she wanted to create was a place to gather all the creatures that she hated — the worst of the worst — so that they would never be able to escape from her."

Nightwalker laughed.

"The Eternal City is a prison."

Chapter-2659: Prison of Eternity

Sunny remained silent for a long while, studying Nightwalker with a distant expression. Eventually, he asked:

"A prison?"

The youth nodded, his silver eyes glistening with nebulous light.

"Indeed. Maybe she looked at what Shadow God had done to Kanakht and was inspired… maybe the idea simply came from her own devious head. In any case, the immortality this hell grants its victims comes at a price. And that price is having to stay here forever."

Sunny frowned subtly.

Nightwalker knew that those who were made immortal by the Eternal City could never leave their beautiful cage for as long as the Eternal City existed. However, his guess at what had motivated the Demon of Repose to build it seemed to be based mostly on his own perception of what this place was.

In truth, Sunny suspected that the real reason was not that unambiguous.

None of them knew what motivated the mysterious daemon, but he did know a few things about her kind. For example, he knew that all other daemons had wrestled with the unconditional taboo placed upon them by the gods and the loneliness that resulted from adhering to that prohibition.

So, had the Demon of Repose truly wanted to torment the prisoners of the Eternal City forever? Or had she simply been unwilling to part with those who won her favor? The answer to that question was now lost, erased by the currents of time.

Even if she had intended to build a paradise for those who were weary, she would have had to find a way to avoid their gratitude.

Because if she had not, the Eternal City would have been destroyed, just like the Kingdom of Hope had been destroyed.

Maybe that was why the Demon of Repose had wandered the world on her living ship instead of residing in the paradise of her creation. Maybe being unwilling to part with those who settled in the Eternal City and tormenting them eternally were not two conflicting possibilities, but cause and effect instead.

Maybe she had indeed been a twisted, demented psychopath. There was a reason why the daemons had been feared so much, after all.

In any case, as much as the secrets of the Eternal City tantalized Sunny, satisfying his curiosity was not his main concern.

His main concern was benefiting from the expedition to the Eternal City as much as possible.

They had already initiated the restoration of the Night Garden and reached the Lighthouse — at the very least, the Saints of Night would be able to use the Memory Nightwalker had used all those years ago and capture some of the starlight trapped within, thus ensuring the continuation of their bloodline.

Sunny still had to find the fragment of Weaver's lineage…

But now, he had a new goal as well.

He looked at Nightwalker.

"So you can't leave the Eternal City for as long as it exists?"

Nightwalker nodded.

"Yes."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then said in a neutral tone:

"Let's destroy the Eternal City, then."

Nightwalker laughed.

Naeve and Bloodwave looked at Sunny, and even Jet smiled.

However, his expression remained the same.

"Ah, that's a good one."

Nightwalker shook his head and looked at Sunny with a wry smile.

"At least you have a sense of humor. From everything you guys told me about Supremes, I expected them all to be exceedingly serious."

Sunny glanced around the room in confusion.

"...I am not joking, though?"

Naeve and Bloodwave seemed taken aback. Nightwalker's smile faltered for a moment — he stared at Sunny with a strange expression, then said in a dubious tone:

"So, you uh… want to destroy the Eternal City? Ah, I see."

Sunny shrugged.

"We had several main goals to achieve here. Repair the Night Garden, gain access to Storm God's lineage, find a certain thing that I am personally interested in, and maybe get our hands on some valuables. Of course, he hoped to conquer the Eternal City and make it a part of the Human Domain, if possible… but that does not seem very plausible anymore. It seems less beneficial than making you a part of the Human Domain, at least."

He looked at Nightwalker with a wistful expression.

"Talent is the most precious resource in the world, after all. And we desperately lack resources for what is about to come. So, yes… if it means adding one more special strategic asset to the forces of humanity, I am willing to turn this entire place to ruin."

Nightwalker studied him silently for a moment.

"It's called the Eternal City for a reason, though. Are you not familiar with the concept of eternity?"

Sunny grinned.

"I am painfully familiar with such concepts, actually. I once fought an infinite rat… another time, I fought an endless worm. Both are dead now, by the way. I bet there is a way to destroy this prison city, as well — I have yet to find a prison that I could not escape."

He hesitated for a moment, then added:

"What makes this city eternal is the divine sorcery of the Demon of Repose. I am an accomplished sorcerer myself, so I know better than most that any kind of sorcery can be destroyed… as long as you know how it functions. There has to be some kind of mechanism that allows the Eternal City to continue existing even in the absence of its creator, so if we reveal that mechanism, breaking it should solve the problem."

A slight frown creased his brow.

"Of course, we will have to deal with the Dutchman first. We will also have to destroy the Flesh of Kanakht to prevent it from escaping into the Dream Realm. And make sure that we don't drown if the dome protecting this sunken city comes down."

Nightwalker gave him a deadpan stare.

"That's all?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Well, I will have to accomplish my personal goal before we venture to end eternity. But if we do… how about it, old man? Care to pick up your sword again?"

He paused for a moment and added awkwardly:

"Or whatever your preferred weapon is, I mean."

The beautiful youth remained silent for a while, and then smiled

faintly.

"Sure. Why not? If you destroy the Eternal City, I'll pick up whatever you want."

His tone suggested that he was not taking Sunny's suggestion seriously.

However, Sunny was dead serious… he was both dead and serious, in fact, which added all his promises grave weight.

Chapter-2660: Meet Your Heroes

Some time later, Sunny and Jet found themselves standing alone outside Nightwalker's hideout. They had left him alone with Bloodwave and Naeve out of tact, to let the Saints of Night have a private conversation.

The radiance of the Lighthouse surrounded them like a brilliant veil, and a cool wind caressed their faces.

Somewhere far away, the Shadow Legion was embroiled in a furious battle, besieged from all sides, and slowly gaining the upper hand.

Sunny sighed.

"Nightwalker… I can't believe he's still alive."

Standing by his side, Jet glanced at him and nodded.

"Yeah. It's like meeting one of your childhood heroes, who supposedly died decades ago. Only the hero is perfectly alive and looks younger than you… and you're the one who's dead instead."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"That's… one way to put it."

He looked at her and frowned.

"So what do you think?"

Jet hesitated for a while.

"I think you are right. Returning from this expedition with Nightwalker will be a great boon — he has become even more

outstanding than he used to be, it seems, and he used to be legendary."

Her expression darkened a little.

"I am not entirely sure that we can trust him, though."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

Jet shrugged.

"I've hunted down plenty of Awakened who couldn't handle the weight of the Nightmare Spell and went crazy, you know? We do not know how damaged that man truly is, considering what he went through. Hopefully, he's fine… or rather, broken in a controllable manner. But we will have to wait and see."

Her expression turned a little somber.

"There is something strange about his story, as well. Don't you think? The Dreamspawn supposedly betrayed and killed him… but why would that man go into all the trouble of traveling to the Eternal City just to kill Nightwalker? He could have done that anywhere else and gotten the lineage of Storm God anyway. Additionally, the act of killing Nightwalker itself seems strange. Wouldn't the Dreamspawn have known that he would come to life?"

Sunny sighed and looked away.

"Maybe he wanted Nightwalker to rot in the Eternal City forever. But yes, I share these concerns. I really hope they won't come to pass, though. For what it's worth, he doesn't seem crazy… or, at least, he seems like the right kind of crazy. And believe me, I know a lot about crazy."

He grinned.

A few moments later, his smile dimmed.

"In any case, for now, the expedition gained another powerful

member. One who knows the Eternal City way better than we do, at that."

Jet nodded.

The two of them remained silent for a while, looking at the wall of the Lighthouse. Eventually, Sunny said:

"I think Naeve is going to go inside. Unlike Aether and Bloodwave — and Nightwalker himself — he inherited the lineage instead of absorbing it. I am not sure what the difference is, but there seems to be one for the members of the House of Night."

Jet smiled faintly.

"It makes sense, I guess. Storm God is the god of journeys and guidance, so her heirs can't just receive their inheritance. They have to find their way to it."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then looked at her and asked in a curious tone:

"Are you going to try? Entering the Lighthouse and receiving Storm God's lineage, I mean?"

Jet hesitated a little, then shook her head.

"No. Why should I?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Because possessing a divine lineage grants you power. Nightwalker, Immortal Flame, Warden of Valor, Ki Song… even the Dreamspawn. All of them had accomplished so much because they possessed one."

Jet chuckled.

"Or maybe they received those lineages because they were the kind of people to accomplish that much."

She looked at Sunny and shrugged.

"Naeve mentioned that not just anyone can assimilate a divine lineage, and that it's a deadly gamble. From what I understand, success does not depend on how powerful or resilient you are — it is more of a question of affinity. And I don't really have any affinity to Storm God and her various aspects. So, I am not keen on taking the risk."

Jet looked away and shrugged.

"And to be honest… I have no interest in inheriting the legacy of dead gods. They failed in the end, after all. So it's a legacy of failure. I don't need it — instead, I'd rather leave behind a legacy of my own."

Sunny smiled.

"How arrogant."

But it was also strangely compelling.

He sighed, thinking about his own quest to assemble the fragments of Weaver's lineage.

Jet, meanwhile, asked:

"What about you?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Me? Oh… I can't absorb the lineage of Storm God. I might be able to benefit from being exposed to it, though."

Blood Weave had swallowed the lineage of Storm God and grown stronger from it. Granted, Sunny had an inherent affinity to shadows, and that lineage had been received from an Aspect Legacy — in other words, it had been presented to him by the Spell.

So, there was a chance that he would be able to swallow the lineage of Storm God, as well.

But Sunny was not sure that the risk was worth it.

After all, if he was incapacitated even for a short while, the Shadow

Legion would be decimated, and their expedition would come to an abrupt end.

He sighed.

"I feel like it's a little irresponsible, for me to enter the Lighthouse now."

Sunny grinned.

"But who am I kidding? Of course, I will enter."

Jet clicked her tongue.

"And I have just boasted about how reliable you are."

They both remained silent for a while after that, surrounded by a blinding silver radiance.

Eventually, Jet asked:

"Are you really going to try and destroy the Eternal City?"

Sunny smiled.

"Sure. Despite all my accomplishments, I have yet to destroy a single city, you know. And something like that... will look really good on my resume…"

Chapter-2661: Shrine of Storm

Sunny walked up the last few steps leading to the gates of the Lighthouse while shielding his eyes from the blinding light. He found Naeve there — his old buddy was sitting on the cold stones with a distant expression on his face.

His indigo eyes reflected the brilliant silver radiance, coming to resemble those of his father.

Sunny paused for a few moments, then glanced at the gates of the Lighthouse and asked in a neutral tone:

"So, how was it?"

Naeve flinched slightly, then turned his head and looked up.

He stared at Sunny for a short while, then shook off his reverie.

"Oh… it was fine, I guess. I am like the Night Garden, at the moment — some parts of me that I did not even know were missing are being repaired. I do not think it will change how strong I am that much, though."

Naeve pointed to a beautiful lantern that stood on the stones beside him, shining like a miniature star.

"This is the greatest treasure of our clan, by the way — the Star Lantern my father brought with him from the Eternal City once. It was emptied before, but now it is full of starlight once again. That… I am both glad for it and disturbed by that."

For someone who had just ensured the uninterrupted continuation of his clan's bloodline, Naeve did not look too happy.

Sunny could understand him, as well. After all, out of those who had

been exposed to the Star Lantern, not everyone was as lucky as Bloodwave and Aether. Many had perished, paving the way for the rest with their lives.

That was how the House of Night had been created.

Naeve sighed.

"Does it make me a coward to say that I would not have allowed my own children or siblings to stand in front of this lantern and be judged by it? Even knowing how desperately the world needs those who wield great power…"

Sunny studied him for a while, then looked away.

"Nothing wrong with being a coward."

He paused for a moment, then smiled faintly.

"You wouldn't believe the lengths I went to to make sure that my sister never has to pass the same trials I had. Actually, that is the sane thing to do. As far as I am concerned, it is what Legacies do to their children that is macabre."

Sunny fell silent, then looked at Naeve with interest.

"How does it feel, by the way? To descend into hell… and find your deadbeat father there?"

Naeve chuckled.

"Ah, that."

He shook his head.

"That was quite a shock… but then again, I always felt like he could still be alive out there, somewhere. Somehow."

Naeve remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"To be honest, we were never that close. He would appear once or twice a year, then disappear again… and by the time I was a

teenager, he disappeared and never appeared again. I faced the expectations of being his son every day, though. But luckily, I never really cared about that."

He shrugged.

"So, finding him here was like finding a stranger. Although, if we do manage to help him escape…"

His expression suddenly changed, and his eyes widened.

"Oh. D—damn."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Naeve seemed genuinely rattled.

"N—no, it's nothing. I just realized that I will have to break the news to my mom. Oh… ah. Maybe… maybe my uncle can do it."

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then laughed.

When his laughter died down, he looked into the silver radiance with a smile.

"You know, I don't even really remember what my father looked like. So if I got the chance to meet him again… well, I'd imagine it would have been quite awkward. I think I'd be happy, though."

He slapped Naeve on the shoulder.

"Your daughter will also gain a new grandpa. Hell… now that I think about that, we simply must get Nightwalker back to civilization."

Naeve smiled.

Leaving him behind, Sunny walked across the stone plates and entered the Lighthouse. Passing through a long corridor, he entered a vast hall.

The great tower was drowned in silver radiance and hollow inside, so

there was no ceiling in sight. Its ground floor resembled a temple.

In a sense, it was the opposite of the somber shrine hidden in the Ebony Tower. One was submerged in deep darkness, the other was bathed in blinding light… but the statues standing in them were almost identical.

Sunny studied the one in front of him. It depicted a beautiful young woman dressed in a flowing tunic, her face obscured by a veil — she was holding a star in one hand, and a bolt of lightning in the other.

He could not help but feel a hint of subtle affection for the statue of Storm God, because she reminded him of Saint.

Turning away, Sunny walked to the edge of the vast hall and ascended the steps that spiraled along the wall of the Lighthouse, climbing the soaring heights. There were no shadows here, so he could only walk — in the end, it took him quite a while to reach the top.

There, passing through a mass of incandescent stone, he entered a platform on which a furious, blinding star burned endlessly, emanating waves of brilliant light and immolating heat.

'Ah…'

Strangely enough, he was not instantly incinerated. If anything, the silver light felt cold — it washed over him almost like a physical force, permeating his very being.

That light illuminated the dark depths of his soul.

Sunny could feel something being etched into it by the light, attempting to change him…

But before the starlight could penetrate the silent abyss of shadows, something vast and ominous stirred in the darkness and cast its hungry gaze at it.

The lineage of Weaver surged, absorbing the radiant light and obliterating it.

Soon enough, there was nothing left of it — only its absence.

Sunny felt the invisible strings reinforcing his soul growing a little firmer, and his mind growing a little clearer.

And that was it.

The change was not too significant, and neither was it too groundbreaker.

The Weave had simply vanquished an invader.

With a small sight, he shielded his eyes and looked away from the trapped star.

"Figures. After all, I have already been claimed by another Star…"

Chapter-2662: Stellar Winds

The platform containing the trapped star was open to the winds, with seven mighty pillars supporting its scorched roof. Sunny stood there motionless for a while, bathing in the furious waves of stellar radiance — then, with a sigh, he walked to the platform's edge, grabbed one of the pillars, and started climbing.

Soon enough, he was on its outer side, with nothing but an abyssal drop beneath him. The brilliant light obscured the world, so he could not see the distant ground, but simply knowing how far he would fall if he let go sent a chill running down his spine.

Of course, a fall would not kill a Sovereign — but despite being Supreme, Sunny still had human instincts. What was more, there were all those deadly traps Nightwalker had set across the island. Falling into a tangle of razor-sharp wire was not going to be pleasant even for Sunny, especially considering that there were no shadows here for him to escape into.

'There are still ways to avoid falling…'

But it was better not to fall at all.

Reminiscing about the perilous task of climbing the great statues of the Forgotten Shore, Sunny slowly scaled the pillar and made his way to the domed roof of the Lighthouse. Eventually, he stood at its highest point, enduring the furious power of the winds.

The vapor shrouding the base of the great tower did not reach here, so he could somewhat see through the radiance.

The rolling underbelly of the Stormsea undulated above him like a dark heaven. Far below, the Eternal City sprawled beneath him like a brilliant hell.

Sunny studied its vast expanse with a somber expression.

The Shadow Legion was still waging war on the three islands in the southern outskirts of the city. The fallen immortals were spread evenly between them, assaulting the strongholds of the silent invaders with demented fury.

He was more interested in what was happening in the north, though.

Out there, the Dutchman and its wraith army had already advanced into the inner rings of the Eternal City.

He could not discern the details of the battle raging there, but could see a ghostly viridian light glowing in the clouds of swirling mist. Grotesque shapes moved in the ethereal fog, and the silver spires were continuously falling and rising from the clouds of dust and debris, flawlessly restored.

Sunny wondered briefly how the captain of the cursed ship was dealing with the fallen immortals. He probably did not have a creature like Nightmare at hand… but then again, both the Dutchman and its captain were ancient fiends. Surely, they had plenty of profane means to contain the tendrils of the Flesh of Kanakht, as well.

They were far ahead of the Shadow Legion, which meant that he had to hurry.

Worse than that… the mysterious creature who had landed in the eastern parts of the Eternal City was even closer to the goal than the other two contenders.

Sunny still had no idea what it was, but he could see the traces of its passing — the toppled buildings, the shattered islands, and torrents of immortal abominations that were flowing into the billowing clouds of black dust, only to vanish without a trace.

By the time the Eternal City rebuilt its streets, the creature was already sowing its eerie and unexplainable devastation somewhere else.

By now, it was only a few islands away from the towering, beautiful

edifice of the Palace.

'...I really, really need to hurry.'

A pensive frown appeared on his face as he studied the landscape of the Eternal City, as well as the distant carnage raging on the islands where the Shadow Legion was besieged.

He studied the wide canals separating the islands and the arching bridges connecting them, as well.

Slowly, his expression settled, and he turned away from the daunting sight.

Sliding off the roof, he called a bit of darkness from the Shadow Lantern and manifested it into two tenebrous wings before the blinding radiance of the Lighthouse could dispel it.

Soon enough, he landed on the ground and folded his wings, wrapping them around himself like a cloak.

Jet, Naeve, Bloodwave, and Nightwalker were standing nearby — they had been discussing something in lively tones, but were not staring at him silently with wide eyes.

Ignoring the stares, Sunny said in a neutral tone:

"I thought that you guys were speaking metaphorically when you told me that there's a star trapped inside the Lighthouse. Turns out… it's a real star. A real star emanating divine light, no less."

Jet blinked a couple of times.

"What? That doesn't even make any sense, scientifically speaking. First of all, this whole place would have been tuned into a cloud of plasma. No, such a tiny star would create a black hole. So, this whole place would have been turned into an infinitely small grain of superdense matter… I think?"

Sunny smiled.

"As if an army of immortal abominations and a city that endlessly

rebuilds itself makes any sense… scientifically speaking. As a matter of fact, scientifically speaking, neither you nor I make any sense. Hasn't stopped us yet, has it?"

Jet cleared her throat.

"Well, if you put it like that… in any case, what's your point?"

Sunny looked at the Saints of Night, lingered for a few moments, and then shrugged.

"If there's an actual star here, drowning everything in its light, doesn't it mean that we have a secret weapon in our hands?"

Jet frowned.

"Listen, Sunny… if you are planning to somehow break the sorcery containing that star and create a black hole right in front of our noses, I must object. Vehemently object!"

He shook his head.

"No, that's not what I mean."

Turning slightly, he looked in the direction where they had left the Night Garden.

"What I meant to say is that a particular member of our expedition can weaponize starlight. So, what will happen if we supercharge Aether and set him loose on the immortal abominations of the Eternal City? I'd say… it's at least worth a try."

Jet opened her mouth, but could not say anything, in the end.

Naeve and Bloodwave simply stared at Sunny with stunned expressions, their eyes slowly widening.

In the silence that followed, it was Nightwalker who spoke first.

Looking between with a confused expression, he frowned slightly and asked:

"Uh… who the hell is Aether, though?"

Chapter-2663: Flexible Strategy

As a Supreme, Sunny had been elevated from being a warrior to being a general — and of a vast army, at that. He was aspiring to become a cunning and competent strategist, and had spent more than a year staging an invasion of the Burned Forest to achieve just that. Sadly, he did not consider himself a seasoned commander yet.

Granted, there were few stellar examples of military excellence for him to emulate — ones he had witnessed, at least. One person who came to mind when he thought about war and warfare was Morgan of Valor, who possessed a shrewd strategic mind and an eerie ability to both manifest and exploit mayhem and chaos.

Morgan always seemed to get the short end of the stick, though.

Every time she received an opportunity to showcase her talent, something seemed to get in the way. A sudden descent of multiple devastating Nightmare Gates, a father who did not really care for winning the war and preferred sending his daughter on a suicide mission, a fratricidal sibling who just happened to be both virtually immortal and in possession of a Divine Aspect…

No, really… that poor woman's luck was worse than Sunny's. And that was a startling feat in and of itself.

In any case, Sunny considered himself to be a novice strategist. If there was one thing he knew, though, it was that a strategist's greatest virtue was the ability to swiftly adapt to the shifting conditions of the battlefield.

Take the Eternal City, for example — initially, Sunny had wanted to conquer it.

But now, he wanted to plunder and destroy it instead.

The conditions had changed, so naturally, his strategy had to change as well.

That was why the Shadow Legion moved.

By then, the battle for the three islands had reached an apogee. Hundreds of the fallen immortals had been lulled to sleep by the Dream Curse, thousands were debilitated and restrained; yet thousands more were crashing into the fortified strongholds of the silent shades, flowing like a river of hideous flesh.

Considering the scale of powers involved in the battle, its visage was nothing short of apocalyptic. The grotesque nature of the immortal horrors and the dark cruelty of the ghostly shades made it look like a scene from the depths of a horrid hell. The violence was chilling, and the scope of destruction was devastating — the streets of the Eternal City quaked as they were ruined and rebuilt again.

But even if it did not seem that way, the outcome of the battle had already been decided. Sunny knew that he would win it.

He was just not going to win it fast enough.

So, it was time to adapt.

In the beautiful park on the middle island, the Dark Castle repelled wave after wave of abhorrent abominations. The carapace of manifested shadows protecting its walls was being shattered and rebuilt again, just like the Eternal City itself was — still, the Marvelous Mimic had received several deep wounds already, trembling in pain and discomfort each time.

Within its halls, countless youths were sleeping with peaceful expressions on their beautiful faces, lost in a maze of dreadful nightmares. On its walls, the shades of the Serpent King and of the human Saints that followed him led the rest of the defenders in repelling the attacks of the fallen immortals, armed and armored by the armaments salvaged in the Hippodrome.

On the roofs of the residential district that had been turned into a frigid hell by a furious blizzard, Slayer and her bestial army were

fighting a savage battle against the abominable dwellers of the Eternal City. The snowstorm was suffused with the brilliant silver light of the distant spires, turning the world into a dim, gloomy white abyss.

Blood flowed like a river, and red waterfalls plummeted down only to freeze into morbid ice sculptures before hitting the ground. Countless buildings were suspended in a state between existence and destruction, stone debris drifting in the air and serving as precarious stages for clashes between the immortals and the murderous shadows.

The Shadow Wolves and the Obsidian Wasps were now clad in glistening suits of metal armor, making each of them far more difficult to vanquish.

The battle in the leisure district was perhaps the most dreadful, with countless abominable immortals assaulting the black fortress of the Shadow Legion. Its walls were enveloped by layers upon layers of manifested shadows, but they were still covered by deep cracks…

Several sections of the Hippodrome had already collapsed and were restored by the Eternal City, causing heavy casualties among its defenders.

From a distance, it seemed as if the black fortress was drowning in a tide of twisting flesh. Red tendrils rose like a forest, and gargantuan shapes moved toward the crumbling walls. Fiend rampaged among them like a dark colossus made of sharp blades — at the moment, however, he was having quite a bit of trouble, entangled by colossal tentacles and pulled to his knees.

Pillars of black smoke rose from the scorched expanse of sizzling flesh around him, and his claws cut the burning tendrils, straining to free him from their hold. A moment later, an enormous black shield suddenly fell from above, piercing the mountain of slithering flesh that besieged him and causing a devastating shockwave when it impacted the ground.

Before the wounded abomination could reel, Saint landed on the cracked cobblestones, causing the ground to quake and the

surrounding buildings to collapse. Rising gracefully from one knee, she brandished her tenebrous sword, severing the colossal horror — and the building behind it — in half.

It was then that the cadence of the three battles entirely changed.

The change did not happen under the walls of the Hippodrome, however. Instead, it happened on the frozen roofs of the residential district.

There, raging currents of snow obscured everything in sight. Bestial shadows appeared out of the snow to descend upon the frenzied immortals in a deadly fury of fangs, claws, and mandibles — the next moment, however, the carnage suddenly ceased.

Slayer's soldiers silently retreated into the blizzard, disappearing from view. The abominations surged restlessly, expecting to be ambushed and torn apart seconds later…

However, seconds passed, and the eerie lull in the mayhem continued.

A dead silence settled upon the residential island, broken only by the howling of the wind.

And then, far away — below the walls of the Hippodrome — a terrifying hiss washed over the attacking immortals.

Chapter-2664: Divide and Conquer

Strategy was not an easy discipline, and when it involved armies capable of performing miraculous feats, it was downright hellish. Sometimes, though, the mystical nature of the warriors fighting these mythical battles offered Sunny a great advantage.

The Shadow Legion had countless advantages over a mundane army, even if the overall power of its soldiers was not taken into account.

The silent shades did not need to eat or drink, for example, and neither did they need shelter from the elements. That alone all but eliminated one of the most vital and laborious tasks of military strategy: establishing supply lines and maintaining logistics.

The shades were immune to disease and sickness, as well, which eliminated the main cause of deaths and casualties in the history of war — more soldiers had perished from disease than had been killed by enemy weapons, after all.

In fact, Sunny's shades were downright immortal. Even if they were vanquished in a battle, they would rise from the dark depths of his soul anew before too long. So he did not even need to worry about casualties, in the traditional sense.

However, there was one particular advantage the Shadow Legion possessed that was easier to overlook, but carried just as much weight.

It was how mobile his shades were.

Many battles in history had been decided simply by which of the competing armies was better at maneuvering. Mobility reigned on the battlefield, and it also reigned in war — that was why nomadic

horsemen had always been a nearly unstoppable force, for example.

Needless to say, the Shadow Legion was far more mobile than ancient horsemen.

Before, Sunny had been aiming to conquer the Eternal City, and he had also needed to spread the fallen immortals thin. That was why he had staged the battle across three separate islands.

Now, however, his goal had changed. The enemy forces were already divided, as well.

So why did he need to continue ignoring one of his greatest advantages?

As the abominable horrors of the Eternal City engaged Slayer's bestial army in the embrace of a calamitous blizzard, he commanded his shades to disengage and retreat. Then, he called all but one of them back into the dark expanse of his soul and stepped into the shadows, carrying Slayer and Serpent with him.

The fallen immortals were left alone in the blinding blizzard summoned by the shade of the Winter Beast.

Sunny brought his Shadows to the tangle of streets of the leisure district, behind the mass of fallen immortals besieging the Hippodrome.

And there, he opened the gates of his soul once again, calling the bestial army back.

Serpent flowed forward like a river of onyx scales, letting out a terrifying hiss. Slayer jumped onto his back, nocking an arrow onto the string of her bow.

The Shadow Wolves, the Obsidian Wasps, the Ember Queen, and the legion of monstrous millipedes rushed forward like a tide.

Just like that, the abominations assaulting the black fortress were pincered between its defenders and a new, equal force of deadly shades. Not only were they attacked from the rear, but the strength of the enemy facing them had also doubled, instantly and completely

shifting the balance of battle.

If that was not enough, one more incarnation of Sunny joined the fight, which meant that the capacity of the Curse doubled as well.

It was a massacre.

The fallen immortals, who had already been slowly losing the battle after breaking themselves against the walls of the Hippodrome, suddenly found themselves assaulted from two sides.

From the rear, Slayer and her bestial army bit into their abominable flesh with primal fury. The defenders of the black fortress suddenly abandoned the battlements and attacked, with Saint and Fiend leading the charge.

Freed from having to maintain the fortifications reinforcing the Hippodrome, Sunny could manifest countless chains to hold the disabled abominations down. More of them were restrained and immobilized, taking them out of the fight — and with each immortal who had been taken down, the burden on the remaining ones only increased.

It was as if they were buried under an avalanche of losses.

Which was a good thing.

After all, his sudden maneuver could only end up being beneficial if victory was achieved swiftly. If he lingered for too long, the abominations from the residential district would simply move westward to the park island, and his forces located there would find themselves overwhelmed and outflanked just like these horrid creatures were.

'Faster… faster…'

Before too long, Saint and Fiend met Slayer and Serpent in the middle of the battlefield. The battle was all but finished by then — the shades finished off the remaining immortals and restrained them, the obliterated buildings restored themselves, and the damaged Hippodrome was rebuilt, returning to its previous spotless condition.

The Dream Curse spread among the disabled abominations like a plague, claiming more and more of them.

It seemed like Nightmare was doing well in his own battle, as well.

Sunny would have liked to celebrate his victory, but there was no time.

Instead of resting, he stepped through the shadows once again.

Soon, the four Shadows — Saint, Slayer, Fiend, and Serpent — as well as both armies — appeared among the silver trees of the beautiful park, encircling the forces attacking the Dark Castle.

The immortals who had been left in the dreadful blizzard on the residential island had just started crossing the bridge by then, with most of them still lost in the raging snow.

The shadow of the Puppet shifted slightly on its perch atop the tallest tower of the Dark Castle, casting the eerie gaze of its enormous black eyes onto the bloody battlefield below.

Now, there were four of Sunny's incarnations present here.

As the reinforcements attacked the immortals from the flanks, the shadow of Daeron leaped down from the tall walls of the Marvelous Mimic. The mighty spear salvaged in the Hippodrome fleshed like lightning, causing havoc among the hideous abominations.

In the next moment, the Mimic itself stirred.

'Show them hell!'

Even though Sunny did not speak his command aloud, his Shadows seemed to have heard him.

And so, they did.

Chapter-2665: Ingredients of War

As an accomplished cook, Sunny knew that countless dishes could be made from the same ingredients.

War was no different. In this battle, for example, three contingents of the Shadow Legion had initially faced three swarms of corrupted immortals. Their strength was roughly equal, so neither side could crush the other. Once he moved the ingredients around, however, the situation changed completely.

Slayer moved to reinforce Saint, vanquishing one of the swarms. Then, both of them descended upon the abominations besieging the Dark Castle — it did not take long to subdue them. The immortals whom Slayer had abandoned in the frigid embrace of the dreadful blizzard had crossed the bridge and entered the park by the time the battle exhausted itself...

But by then, the full force of the Shadow Legion and four incarnations of its malevolent commander were facing the remaining one third of the enemy swarm. More were crossing from the north, attracted by the bloodshed of battle, but their number was not sufficient to change anything.

"Wipe them out."

Saint, Slayer, Serpent, Fiend, and the shadow of Daeron led the sea of silent shadows into an all-out attack. For a short while, the beautiful park turned into a shattered, broken wasteland where a furious battle was seething and roiling under the undulating black sky…

But soon enough, it was pristine and beautiful again.

The battle was over.

The fallen immortals were defeated and subdued, slowly succumbing to the Dream Curse. Their bodies were being carried into the great maw of the Dark Castle, disappearing from view. Those shades that were not restraining the abominations or moving them assembled into a defensive formation facing north, ready to repel the stragglers wandering into the park from the next island over.

The Wharf Island, the Park Island, the Leisure Island, the Residential Island… and the Lighthouse Island, as well. All of them belonged to Sunny now.

Not that it mattered anymore.

Turning into a human atop the walls of the Dark Castle, Sunny inhaled deeply and looked north, at the distant silhouette of the Palace.

"There is only one place that matters, now."

His expression turned somber.

Even if he cut a straight line from his current territory to the heart of the Eternal City, he would have to conquer three or four more islands. Of course, going in a straight line was impossible — the immortals from the neighboring island would flank and surround the Shadow Legion, swiftly reducing its numbers to zero.

So, if he wanted to reach the Palace in full force, he would have to slowly and methodically lay siege to at least a dozen more islands, taking the entire southern half of the Eternal City under control.

Naturally, there was no time for that.

"Damn it."

It seemed like he was not destined to lead a conventional military campaign, after all. He would have to pull off a trick once again, only on a much larger scale than usual this time.

His three incarnations appeared on the wall near him, each wearing a dark expression.

"That… really is unfortunate."

"Huh? Not having to wage an endless battle against a myriad of eternal abominations is unfortunate?"

"Well, when you put it like that…"

"Who has time to fight myriads of eternal abominations when there are myriads of murderous ghosts to fight instead, anyway?"

"Right?"

"Right…"

"Does it seem like a good time to have a chat, fools?"

Sunny looked at the various vessels of himself and grinned.

"Hurry up and go. Try to find a museum, or something."

Three of his incarnations grinned, as well, and dissolved into the shadows.

Using Shadow Step to move as fast as possible, they each went to one of the three neighboring islands. One jumped between various shops and establishments on the Leisure Island, one searched the most opulent manors on the Residential Island, and the last one searched the warehouses and offices of the Wharf Island.

Anything that looked remotely valuable was immediately pulled into his Soul Sea.

Sunny smiled faintly and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Ah… pillaging. It really is the best."

Then, the smile drained slowly from his face. Looking down, he said:

"Move."

Far below, the Shadow Legion marched forward. At the same time, the Dark Castle stirred and abandoned the hill it had been standing on. Following the orderly rows of silent shades, it crawled north, as

well.

As they advanced north, toward the distant edge of the island, more immortals coming from the inner islands attacked them — of course, there were far too few of them to pose a threat to the Shadow Legion. In fact, most of them were taken down by Sunny's Shadows before even reaching the vanguard of his eerily quiet army.

The main mass of the corrupted immortals had not left the islands where they dwelled. More importantly, a great number of them had migrated north to fight the wraith army of the Dutchman and east to fight the mysterious abomination — because Sunny arrived last, the pressure on him and his forces was lessened.

That was why he had not been swarmed and buried under a tidal wave of abominable flesh yet.

Still, by the time the Shadow Legion reached the northern edge of the island, the series of brief skirmishes it had been fighting turned into an uninterrupted stream of attacks. There were still too few of the fallen immortals to pose a serious risk to the silent shades, but already enough to make Sunny return to augmenting the Puppeteer.

And there were even more of them crossing the bridge, which promised nothing but trouble.

That was before something collided with the surface bridge at terrible speed, of course, causing a devastating shockwave to roll in all directions.

A moment later, the second cannonball impacted against the bridge, turning a dozen abominations into a crimson haze.

The Puppeteer — and Sunny as well — cast his gaze west.

There, the edges of the Park Island were suddenly illuminated by brilliant starlight.

Sunny smiled mentally.

'Our boat has arrived…'

Chapter-2666: First Helmsman

The turbulent water far below surged and rose. A massive wave rushed across the canal, carrying an incalculable number of tiny abominations with it. In the distance, a halo of silver radiance illuminated the shores of both islands.

A moment later, the wind brought the sounds of a furious cannonade and of an eerie, echoing cacophony of roars.

The Night Garden was approaching.

The canals separating the islands of the Eternal City were truly vast, some spanning several kilometers across, but they were still hardly wide enough to navigate a titanic ship through them.

Unless a truly exceptional helmsman steered it.

And at the moment, the living ship was being guided by one such man.

Nightwalker's face had betrayed a wistful expression when he stepped aboard his former home and stronghold. Looking around, he remained silent for a long while, and then smiled bitterly.

"Love what you've done to the place."

His gaze stopped at the imposing black edifice of an obsidian cannon, and he tilted his head with a strange expression.

"Are those… cannons?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. I forged them."

Nightwalker's eyes suddenly glistened, the trace of bitterness

disappearing from them.

"By the dead gods, what a great idea. I always wanted to get myself some cannons!"

Sunny coughed.

"Right?"

What kind of ship did not have cannons?

'A sad one…'

Nightwalker marveled at the ferocious cannons for a few more moments, then looked down, at the deck of the living ship. His expression slowly turned strange.

"Did you say… that there are millions of people living aboard the Garden now?"

Jet nodded.

"It's a bit crowded, but because of how vertical the nature of the ship is, everyone has enough space to live."

Nightwalker remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I used to live on this enormous ship alone in the beginning, you know? Ah… those were the days…"

Despite the words he spoke, his voice did not sound too cheerful.

"Well, regardless. I assume the bridge is where it used to be, so let's go."

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It was strange, but despite the astonishing and dreadful events happening around the living ship, the people sheltered on its lower decks and in its cavernous holds had no idea about what was transpiring outside. At most, they felt slight tremors and heard muffled echoes of the firing cannons.

The mood among the denizens of the floating city was not festive. In fact, it was somewhat subdued and a little somber… however, they did not seem very tense, and neither did they seem particularly frightened. Perhaps it was because of the Awakened and Ascended warriors patrolling the streets, who instilled a feeling of safety in the mundane citizens, or perhaps it was because of Jet.

Maybe it was simply because most of these people either worked for the government, were family members of government workers, or had belonged to the House of Night.

In any case, Naeve and Bloodwave descended below deck to check on things and inform the officers about what was about to happen, so that they would be better prepared to pacify the civilians. Sunny, Jet, and Nightwalker, meanwhile, proceed to the bridge.

Aether's reaction to suddenly meeting the legendary founder of his clan was quite a sight to behold. His reaction to hearing what Sunny wanted him to do, however, was even more intense.

He did agree to try, though.

When Nightwalker stepped into the runic circle, it flashed and came to life. Perhaps Sunny imagined it, but the intensity of the ethereal glow seemed greater than when Jet or Aether did the same.

Nightwalker brushed his hand across the polished wood, then smiled faintly.

"It's like riding a bicycle."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then asked in a lively tone:

"Oh, you know what a bicycle is? Actually, I own a bicycle workshop. The best, most premier, affordable bicycles in the Dream Realm! We even have a line of luxury models enchanted by the former Spellsmiths of Valor. You must have buried tons of treasure somewhere, right? Come find me in Bastion when we get out of here — I'll give you a discount!"

He was not one to miss a chance to peddle his goods, so he gave Nightwalker a wink.

When Sunny first heard the word "bycicle", he had assumed that it was some kind of Nightmare Creature with two sickles instead of hands. But as it turned out, it was one of Aiko's most genius business ideas instead…

Nightwalker gave him a strange look.

"Bicycles in the Dream Realm… why does it surprise me more than a bunch of Supremes running around, killing each other?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, struggling to find an answer.

Soon enough, the Night Garden moved, sailing toward the Lighthouse.

The abominable fish populating the dark waters rushed to sink their razor-sharp teeth into its hull, only to be swallowed by it instead. They were inexplicably restored outside the living ship in a few moments, though, only to attack it in demented frenzy again.

The water boiled around the Night Garden.

And now, it had reached the Park Island after navigating the narrow passageways of the twisting canals.

The living ship was bathed in blinding starlight… because it was surrounded by a cage of annihilating rays that were like a net that caught the abominations lunging themselves on the ancient vessel.

The canals of the Eternal City might have been wide, but when the titanic ship sailed through them, they seemed narrow. There was not enough space between its sides and the islands to prevent the fallen immortals — at least some of them — from trying to leap across or extend their long tendrils toward it.

The deck of the Night Garden was almost level with the surface of the islands, as well, so those standing on it could clearly see the harrowing visage of two ghastly rivers of abominable flesh flowing on both sides of the living ship, rushing along the edges of the islands it passed.

The fallen immortals had been stirred and lured by the passage of the

Night Garden, congregating around it in great numbers.

The only thing that protected it from their fury was the obliterating cage of starlight surrounding it, the Saints defending its deck — and the twenty-four cannons that Sunny single-handedly charged with Supreme essence, aimed, and fired at the undulating mass of abominations.

The Park Island was free of immortals, at least…

So, he could concentrate his fire on only one terrifying river of flesh.

Chapter-2667: Boarding Party

Jet, Naeve, and Bloodwave were spread out across the deck of the Night Garden, ready to defend it if the abominable dwellers of the Eternal City broke through the shield of severing starlight that surrounded the living ship, as well as the furious barrage of the obsidian cannons.

Nightwalker was steering the ship, while Aether was sitting on the floor of the runic hall with his legs crossed and his eyes closed, seemingly meditating. His skin glowed with a pale silver radiance, and his white hair moved slightly in the wind. He was controlling the radiance of Storm God's Lighthouse to slash and sever any abomination that attempted to leap onto the deck of the Night Garden.

His Aspect had always been powerful — granted, it was most effective at night — but here in the Eternal City, which was illuminated by the Lighthouse and the silver spires reflecting its light, it became especially deadly… deadly enough to keep most of the abominations at bay, at least.

The reason why a mere Transcendent could defend the Night Garden from countless Great Ones was the star trapped at the top of the Lighthouse. Not only was he far closer to the source of his power than usual, but the star itself was also special, containing a trace of Storm God — it was the divinity of the Goddess of the Black Skies that made its light so fatal to Nightmare Creatures, and why the Night Garden could be protected by a shield of sacral starlight… for as long as Aether still had essence, at least.

As a result, the living ship seemed to have become a radiant comet, bathing the streets of the Eternal City in light as it moved through the canals.

'How pretty…'

Sunny himself was leaning on a pillar that formed one of the arched portals of the runic halls, one step away from plummeting from the great height of the Mainmast Pagoda to the deck far below. He had two tasks at the moment — one was to protect Aether, the other to operate the enchanted cannons.

Before, he had manifested countless hands out of shadows to load and fire them… but now, that did not seem sufficient. So, he manifested crude human figures instead, controlling them like golems to maintain a ceaseless barrage.

At the moment, the twelve port cannons were firing at the mass of abominable flesh pursuing the Night Garden along the edge of the nameless island to the north. The starboard cannons, meanwhile, were being moved: six of them would join the port cannons, while the remaining six would face forward, since they were needed to accomplish a different task.

Soon enough, the devastating hail of charged cannonballs grew even more intense, causing bloody carnage among the abominable immortals. The thunderous roaring of the cannonade fused into an echoing, deafening howl, traveling along the canal in both directions.

The abominations torn apart by the bombardment swiftly mended their pulverized bodies, of course — but they remained dead enough to slow the tide of hideous flesh down. More importantly, they could not leap toward the Night Garden, since the cannons created an iron curtain around it.

Well… it was more of a shadow curtain, really, since the cannonballs Sunny used to load the cannons were made out of manifested shadows.

Surrounded by starlight and devastation, the Night Garden sailed through the canal. Soon enough, the bridge connecting the Park Island to the nameless one came into view — the six cannons moved to the bow of the living ship opened fire then, decimating the immortals trying to cross it.

But that first salvo was merely to help Sunny adjust aim.

By the time he reloaded the cannons, he could see the Shadow Legion assembled at the edge of the Park Island, as well.

The vast sea of monstrous shades stood in neat rows, with gargantuan figures of dead titans among them, the Dark Castle towering above it all, and the colossal moth perched atop it…

Nightwalker looked at the eerie sight with a stunned expression.

"W—what… what the hell is this?"

Leaning on the pillar with an aloof expression, Sunny smiled faintly.

"This is the rest of me."

He turned his head and looked at Nightwalker.

"It's time to stop."

The Night Garden slowed down. It continued moving forward due to inertia for a while, but eventually came to a halt near the formation of the Shadow Legion. The precision with which Nightwalker managed to park the titanic ship was nothing short of stunning, actually.

He stared at Sunny for a moment, then looked away and mumbled under his nose:

"The rest of me… what is that even supposed to mean..."

Sunny looked away and gazed at the great mass of his silent shades.

He sighed.

"Death swallows all."

With that, bridges made of shadows extended from the island, connecting it to the deck of the Night Garden.

And the silent shades marched forward, crossing them to board the living ship.

The Shadows Wolves, the Obsidian Wasps, the Asuras of

Condemnation, the Black Millipedes and their Queen… the spawns of the Chain of Nightmares, the shadows of the human Saints… Daeron, Goliath, Winter Beast, Defiled Seeker… and countless more.

The flooded the surface decks of the Night Garden like a dark tide, spreading along the great length of the living ship to defend it. Saint, Slayer, Fiend, and Serpent were there, as well — a few moments later, the absent incarnations of Sunny joined them, having returned from pillaging the conquered islands.

Finally, the colossal moth sitting atop the Dark Castle shifted subtly and then spread its vast wings. The Puppeteer raised a hurricane when it flapped them and leaped off the tall tower, soaring through the air, and finding a new perch atop the main mast of the Night Garden. It was as if a piece of the night sky itself had moved.

All that was left was the Dark Castle. It crossed the gap between the edge of the island and the living ship last, settling in an open space near the bow of the Night Garden. The ancient vessel swayed lightly as it accommodated Mimic's weight.

Nightwalker observed all that with a strange expression.

"I guess... you really are a being of the same caliber as the Serpent King."

Sunny suppressed a smile.

He remained silent for a moment, and then said:

"Oh, I am. Actually, I killed the Serpent King once. He's here somewhere, by the way, among my shadows…"

Chapter-2668: Bridge Issue

With the vast sea of silent shadows scattered across the Night Garden, the ship looked almost crowded. Far more people lived here, of course, but people were human-sized, while many warriors of the Shadow Legion weren't — so, it seemed as if the main deck was drowning in darkness.

The dark figures of the shades contrasted sharply against that stark silver starlight, and it almost seemed as if the Night Garden had become an eerie black-and-white gravure. The living ship looked like the boat of Charon, the soul guide, drifting on dark waters to deliver the shadows of the dead to hell.

It was quite ironic, then, that what surrounded them instead were the sunken streets of the Eternal City — a place devoid of death, one that had been meant to be a paradise but became no different from hell instead.

"Hey, Your Lordship… why is there a giant moth sitting on my ship?"

Nightwalker's voice sounded a little subdued.

Sunny gave him a long look.

"...It's not your ship. It's Jet's ship."

He was very happy to have found Nightwalker, a legendary figure among the fearsome Awakened of the First Generation… but he was not going to let Jet be displaced as a result. The House of Night had lost their Citadel to Mordret, and Mordret lost it to Soul Reaper — so, as far as Sunny was concerned, it was hers for as long as she wanted it.

Nightwalker had not shown signs of wanting to get his past Citadel back — in fact, he seemed generally aloof and devoid of any strong

desires — but it was better to set the record straight early on.

Indeed… it was definitely not because Sunny was outraged and aghast at the fact that this deadbeat bum of an old mad had the audacity to flirt with Jet, who was so out of his league in all regards that it was not even funny… no, definitely not.

Nightwalker cleared his throat.

"Right. Of course."

Sunny looked away with a satisfied smirk.

"And this moth is here because it's very helpful. No doubt about it."

He looked ahead.

"Anyway, we should continue onward — unless we want for those abominations to catch up to us."

Nightwalker stared at his back for a few moments, then shrugged.

"You'd better load those cannons, then."

More and more immortals joined the frenzied torrent of hideous flesh that reached over the chasm of the canal toward the Night Garden. It was as if a disgusting red forest was growing on the edge of the island, twisting and slithering while individual abominations leaped across.

Looking at that nightmarish sight, Sunny could not help but remember the labyrinth of crimson coral that had once covered the Forgotten Shore. Even though that deadly maze would offer little threat to him now, he still could not help but shiver as an unpleasant coldness grasped his heart. That fear was ingrained into it.

"...You don't have to worry about that."

The fallen immortals were torn apart by the impacts of the cannonballs, erased from existence by the ranged attacks of the Shadow Legion, and cut to pieces by the slaying rays of silver starlight. A bloody haze permeated the air, and torrents of blood

poured into the seething water below, where myriads of tiny abominations hungrily drank them.

No enemy had reached the deck of the Night Garden yet, but if the swarm grew enough while the living ship remained static, the situation could change.

The living ship was already moving, though. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the Night Garden moved forward through the narrow canal.

Sadly, they were facing a peculiar problem..

The canal was just wide enough for an incredibly skilled helmsman to navigate the titanic ship through it, and the surface of the islands was almost level with its deck. However, the tall masts of the Night Garden extended far into the sky, just as tall as the distant spires.

And, therefore, the bridge connecting the two islands was in the way.

"You have a minute!"

Nightwalker's voice was a little nervous.

Not deigning the warning with an answer, Sunny looked forward coldly.

Hidden from view by the massive bulk of the Dark Castle, the six cannons installed on the bow of the living ship barked in quick succession and rolled back as they spat out six devastating cannonballs.

This time, Sunny was not aiming at the abominations crossing the bridge, however.

He was aiming at the bridge itself.

The first cannonball impacted like a meteor, making the bridge ripple like a rope and sending a net of cracks running through its great mass. Enormous pieces of stone shot outward like shrapnel, raining down like hail.

The bridge would have restored itself, of course… but just a split second later, the second cannonball struck the same place, exacerbating the grievous damage done to the structure of the bridge.

And then, another…

All six cannonballs hit their mark with uncanny precision, striking the bridge consecutively, but in the span of a single second. The deafening thunderclaps of the six impacts fused into a single, terrifying boom.

That was a level of coordination and accuracy that six cannon crews would have never been able to achieve, but since Sunny was operating the cannons personally, he could pull off the improbable firing sequence himself.

Those first shots had not been wasted futilely, allowing him to correct his aim.

Shattered and broken, the great bridge let out a low, rumbling groan…

And collapsed.

Countless tons of stone poured into the canal, taking dozens of fallen immortals with them.

Before the sorcery of the Eternal City could reverse the destruction and pull the pieces back together, gargantuan tendrils of shadow suddenly rose from the bow of the Night Garden and wrapped themselves around the largest chunks of shattered stone, holding them in place. It was as if the living ship was merely a shell hiding the body of a vast, formless, dark monster.

Sunny grunted quietly.

"Oh, that's…"

That was far more difficult than he had expected.

The power with which the Eternal City was pulling the fragments of the broken bridge back was truly horrifying. So, resisting it, even

temporarily, felt similarly dreadful.

The tendrils of shadows rooted themselves in the Night Garden, and as a result, the living ship actually rose a few meters higher above the water.

"A… accelerate a little, damn it!"

Beads of cold sweat appeared on Sunny's face.

He did not have to endure long, though.

Soon enough, the Night Garden sailed beneath the shattered bridge, its masts passing freely between the suspended fragments.

Dismissing the tendrils of shadows, Sunny let out a relieved sigh and leaned heavily on the pillar. Behind him, the bridge was already restoring itself… but it did not matter.

Having passed it, the Night Garden rushed forward.

Their daring voyage to the heart of the Eternal City had begun.

Chapter-2669: Coastal Pursuit

The Night Garden moved through the canals of the Eternal City, surrounded by starlight and enveloped by the thunderous roaring of its cannons. The mass of abominations pursuing it along the shore of the portside island was steadily growing, making Sunny frown and strain to load the cannons faster.

Empowered by the Curse, all shades that could attack from range were helping the cannons slow down the pursuers and reap a chillingly bloody harvest. The swarm of fallen immortals was continuously torn and decimated, but restored itself each time like a horrid, furious, undying beast. The sight of it all was indescribable, ghastly, and uncanny…

But then again, Sunny had long grown numb to all the horrors of the Dream Realm.

Saint was among the shades, tossing one javelin after another into the seething mass of abominations. Funnily enough, the shadow of Goliath, whom she had slain with a javelin once, was nearby, unleashing its immolating gaze upon the swarm of corrupted immortals — due to its Rank, the damage it dealt was not deadly, but it served to wound and weaken the enemies.

Slayer had mounted an Obsidian Wasp and flew to the very top of the main mast of the Night Garden, hiding there in the shadow of the Puppeteer's wing. Her arrows fell like a deadly rain, unerringly felling the most monstrous of the immortal swarm despite the great distance.

Sunny had wrapped one of his shadows around her to enjoy the benefit of sharing her incredibly sharp senses. From the great height of Slayer's precarious position, most of the southern part of the Eternal City was like an open book…

He did not like what he saw at all.

The shadow of Daeron had put aside the spear and took up a fearsome greatbow that had been salvaged in the armory of the Hippodrome. His arrows struck the fallen immortals like bolts of lightning, impaling their hideous bodies.

Strangely enough, Serpent had assumed the form of Daeron and picked up a bow, as well. However, its arrows were far more deadly and devastating than those of the dead Supreme — that was because Serpent was a Shadow and possessed the Will, while the shadow of the Serpent King did not.

'Quite ironic, isn't it?'

While its defenders repelled the pursuing abominations, the Night Garden slowly approached the edges of both islands. Sunny could already see the ice-covered building of the Residential Island in the distance — Nightwalker could see them, as well.

His expression turned somber.

"This… is pretty bad."

Sunny turned and gave him a questioning gaze.

"What exactly?"

A pale smile appeared on Nightwalker's youthful face.

"Don't you see this ship, Shadow?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Of course, I do."

Nightwalker nodded.

"Then you should have noticed that it's very damn long."

He let out a heavy sigh.

"Navigating it through this narrow canal is already difficult enough,

so how hard do you think making a turn will be?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Oh."

They were currently moving east, but to reach the Palace, they had to turn north. The fastest way would be to do that at the nearest junction of several canals and sail right toward their goal. If that was impossible, though, they would have to reach the edge of the city, escape into the open waters, circle the city counterclockwise, and enter the canals again from the east.

Time was of the essence, though.

Looking ahead, Nighthwalker let out another sigh. His silver eyes suddenly seemed to glow brighter.

"Don't worry too much, though. I have a tendency to always get to where I'm going… I do suggest you hold on to something, though. This is going to be rough."

Sunny grimaced and looked away.

"It always is."

Nightwalker chuckled.

"Indeed…"

The Night Garden was swiftly approaching the junction between canals separating four islands. The water was turbulent, and the stone walls of the isolated districts of the Eternal City seemed terribly close to each other…

Even if the junction itself was much wider than the canals were, and shaped irregularly, Sunny could not help but feel like guiding the Night Garden through the turn was impossible.

He winced.

"Say, is it a bad time to tell you… that I absolutely hate traveling by

ship?"

Nightwalker did not seem pleased by that question.

"What? Why?"

Sunny scowled.

"The first time I did, it was on a boat made from demon bones, sailing across an abomination-infested sea that was actually a Great Titan. Halfway through the journey, the boat was destroyed by a creepy depth dweller, and I almost died."

His scowl deepened.

"The second time was on an alloy battleship across the Indian Ocean, and wouldn't you know it? Halfway through the trip, we were attacked by some horrid sea monsters, the hull was breached, and I almost died."

Nightwalker coughed.

Sunny, meanwhile, continued:

"The third time — gods, don't even get me started. I had to brave a river of an Unholy Titan's blood on anything and everything, starting from makeshift rafts and ending with the corpse of an enormous, monstrous turtle. And guess what? The raft was shattered, the corpse was eaten, and when I finally found a normal ship… that's when the really terrible part started! I almost died."

It started as a joke, but now, Sunny was really fuming.

"Ah, damn it. Curse it all! Why the hell did I think that this damn expedition would be any better?"

Nightwalker gave him a look of pity.

"No way. That's some terrible luck! But it couldn't have all been bad, right? What, have you never had a good experience on a boat?"

Sunny opened his mouth to offer an angry retort, but then closed it.

A strange expression appeared on his face.

Eventually, his frown was replaced by a faint, absent-minded smile.

"Well, come to think of it… I did go boating on a date once. That was nice."

He lingered for a moment, and then nodded.

"I take it back. Boats are great..."

Chapter-2670: Broken Navigation

In the end, Nightwalker did manage to make the turn. Sunny had not been sure how he was going to, since it seemed physically impossible, but the founder of the House of Night was not considered to be the greatest and most daring seafarer in history without a reason.

"Pull more of your creepy shadows to the bow!"

The colossal ship moved like a nimble gondola in his steady hands. The Night Garden turned slightly in the canal, its stern nearly scraping the Park Island while its bow came mere meters away from the shore of the opposite one… and the frenzied mass of abhorrent abominations seething on its edge.

Nightwalker's warning had been timely, but shades alone were not enough to prevent the fallen immortals from pouring onto the deck of the ship. Even the simultaneous discharge of the six cannons installed on the bow was not enough — so, Sunny sent Saint and Fiend there, augmenting each of them with one of his incarnations.

Luckily, the fierce confrontation did not last long. Soon enough, the Night Garden reached the termination point of the island, escaping into the wider waters of the canal junction.

There was one problem, though…

There was still not quite enough space there to allow the titanic ship to pass.

'How is he going to do it?'

Nightwalker remained calm, so Sunny assumed that he was confident. He was probably relying on some mystical quality of his

Aspect or his divine lineage… or so Sunny thought.

He turned out to be wrong, though, since Nightwalker used a far more mundane solution to push the living ship through the impossibly tight turn.

"Grab something!"

Sunny took a few steps away from the pillar he had been leaning on and grabbed Aether.

He was not afraid for himself, since even falling over the edge of the runic hall would not pose him any danger. Aether, however, could very well be hurt by the fall from the great height of the main pagoda, not to mention that his concentration could be broken, thus weakening the shield of starlight protecting the ship.

In the next moment…

'This crazy…'

The Night Garden rammed into the side of the island at great speed. The immense weight of the living ship was already astronomical, and with countless shades — including giants like Goliath and the Puppeteer, not to mention the great bulk of the Dark Castle — aboard, it had become simply terrifying. The resulting impact was so violent and dire that an entire section of the island collapsed, crumbling into the foaming water.

Colossal chunks of stone were sent barreling through the air like shells.

'...bastard!'

Sunny barely prevented Aether from being thrown over the edge of the runic hall.

"You lunatic!"

Nightwalker laughed loudly.

Piercing through the cloud of dust and stone debris, the bow of the

Night Garden emerged from it and entered the northward canal. Its port side scraped against the jagged surface of the shattered stone, leaving deep scars on the living hull — however, it did not slow down much, continuing to move forward.

"Ah, that's better!"

The demented youth grinned brightly while steering the ship into the canal. Sunny looked forward and then cursed loudly, noticing the wall of another island swiftly approaching the bow of the living ship at an angle.

Soon enough, the Night Garden collided with it with its starboard side. This time, the impact was only glancing, sending cracks running through the ancient stone and helping the living ship complete its turn.

Breathing heavily, Sunny looked back.

The edge of one island was entirely shattered, mending itself slowly, while the other was cracked. The hull of the Night Garden was damaged, but not breached.

The water flowing through the canals swayed and surged, climbing hundreds of meters higher than it was supposed to be.

Nightwalker hummed.

"What's up with that expression? We made the turn, didn't we?"

He smiled brightly.

"Actually, I've been feeling stifled ever since we set off from the Lighthouse. These narrow canals are the worst. Open seas are where my heart lies, with no limits or boundaries in sight… but this was unexpectedly fun!"

Aether just stared at them both in shock.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Yes, we did make the turn. And that is why I have this expression!"

Nightwalker studied him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well, anyway. I suggest you start loading your cannons fast."

Sunny frowned.

"What?"

Nightwalker pointed forward.

"Load your cannons! There's a bridge ahead!"

Cursing, Sunny spun around and looked forward.

The Night Garden was moving north now, and there was indeed another bridge barring their way north.

"Damnation!"

Controlling the manifested shadows, Sunny hurriedly reloaded the cannons. He needed to take apart an indestructible bridge again… and this time, it was a moving target. Actually, it was the Night Garden that was moving — but that did not make the aiming easier.

The torrent of abominations had made its way around the broken section of the island by then, continuing the pursuit.

What's worse, it was not the Park Island starboard of the Night Garden now. Instead, it was another nameless island, complete with its own swarm of abominable immortals.

They were already rushing toward its edge, assembling into a second river of grotesque flesh.

The living ship was going to be besieged on both sides soon…

And it was only going to get worse.

The deeper into the Eternal City they went, the more islands they would pass. So, the pursuing abominations from the previous ones would join those from the new ones, and their numbers would continuously swell.

Until all fallen immortals left in the southern half of the Eternal City were straining to get to the deck of the living ship, overwhelmed by a frenzied desire to consume Sunny, Jet, the Saints of Night… and the millions of people sheltered inside the Night Garden.

But maybe… maybe…

That was a good thing.

Sunny's eyes glistened dangerously.

'I wonder if the Dutchman would like my present…'

Chapter-2671: Gregarious Gondolier

At some point, Sunny somehow became a person who had experienced and endured more than most people. So much so that bewildering people with honest retellings of his many misadventures was one of his favorite pastimes, in fact. In other words, he considered himself to be quite a veteran. Nothing really rattled him anymore, let alone scared him.

However…

As the Night Garden navigated the narrow maze of the Eternal City's canals, he had to admit that this was quite possibly the most dreadful situation he had ever found himself in. Godgrave, the Burned Forest, Ariel's Game… nothing could compete with the horrors of the sunken city of the Demon of Repose in scope and scale of their sheer deadfulness.

Perhaps only the Tomb of Ariel could compare — not the endlessly flowing waters of the Great River or its nebulous Estuary, but the inner walls of the ancient pyramid, where a myriad of Dark Butterflies rested on the cold black stone.

He had only glimpsed those abominable creatures from afar, though. The hideous legion of corrupted immortals, on the contrary — the hosts of the Flesh of Kanakht — was right in his face.

'Goddamit… that's a little bit too much.'

One of these damned things was already creepy and disgusting enough to make even Effie lose her appetite. But with thousands of them pursuing the Night Garden like two grotesque, slithering rivers of flesh… Sunny felt like he would never be able to enjoy a meal again.

By now, the living ship was surrounded on both sides and besieged. The canals differed in width, but there was never more than a few hundred meters between its hull and the weathered foundations of the islands — a negligent distance for Great Nightmare Creatures.

The cannons roared without pause, and the barrier of slaying starlight still surrounded the Night Garden like a brilliant shield. However, that alone was not enough to prevent the immortal abominations from invading its deck, and so most of the pressure fell on the Shadow Legion, which Sunny controlled.

It had been fine at first, but as more and more immortals joined the pursuit, the dreadful battle had become frenetic and feverish.

Sunny was barely keeping it together as he commanded the shades and manned the cannons to push the abominations back. On top of that, he also needed to destroy any bridge that appeared in the path of the living ship and prevent its pieces from fusing back together until the ship passed. His head was starting to ache.

The noise of it all was unbearable, and the sight of it all was terrifying enough to give even the most seasoned veterans of the Dream Realm nightmares. All the shades of the Shadow Legion, all of his Shadows, and most of his incarnations were engaged in the fierce battle against countless undying Great Nightmare Creatures — that was indeed a battle unlike any Sunny had fought before.

Needless to say, its carnage and mayhem were peerless.

The pristine expanse of the Eternal City shone with a beautiful silver light, and the cold waters of the Stormsea rolled above the besieged Night Garden like a dark sky.

"Damn Weaver… why couldn't that nasty daemon just put pieces of themself somewhere nice and easily accessible…"

"Huh? What are you mumbling about?"

Sunny looked at Nightwalker and pursed his lips.

"Just cursing out a dead Demon."

The youthful founder of the House of Night stared at him silently for a moment, then nodded.

"Ah, I see. Been there, done that."

At that moment, the air of the runic hall suddenly turned cold, and Jet appeared out of torrents of mist.

She looked around warily, then dismissed her scythe and found herself a chair to sit down.

Despite the dreadful violence happening all around the living ship, she seemed entirely at ease. In fact, she languidly stretched her legs and leaned back in the chair, letting out a satisfied sigh.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Tired?"

Jet looked at him evenly.

"Dead tired."

Then, she chuckled and leaned her head back, closing her eyes. Sunny smiled, as well, and turned his attention back to the battle.

Only Nightwalker seemed surprised.

"Aren't you going to help defend the ship? From what I see, it's an all-hands-on-deck situation."

Jet sighed and spoke without opening her eyes:

"Nobody likes to fight an immortal abomination, but in my case, they are simply the absolute worst kind of enemy."

Sunny nodded quietly. Jet's soul could not generate essence, so she relied on her Aspect to exist. That Aspect allowed her to absorb a portion of soul essence of those she killed — the fallen immortals of the Eternal City never died, however, which meant that fighting them was harmful to her.

Not only could she not replenish her broken soul, but she had to actively drain its reserves. Worst still, there were no other Nightmare Creatures in this part of the Eternal City, so she could not hunt at all.

Jet opened one eye and looked at Nightwalker.

"Don't worry, though. I am simply saving my strength for the Dutchman."

He studied her with interest.

"Oh?"

Jet nodded.

"Do you know why they call me Soul Reaper? It's because my Aspect allows me to directly attack the soul. Among other things, that means that I am custom-made to slay spectral abominations and wraiths of all kinds."

She smiled darkly.

"The last time we met the Dutchman, I sank a few of his ships. I never got to the flagship, though… maybe I will this time."

Looking away, Jet sighed.

"I am not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, though. After all, no one knows a lot about the Dutchman — what it is, where it comes from, and what it's capable of."

Nightwalker chuckled.

"Oh, really?"

He shook his head and then said in an aloof tone:

"You're mistaken. I might not know a lot about most things… but I do know a thing or two about the Dutchman. After all, that thing had been hunting me down for decades."

Nightwalker looked at Sunny and Jet with a smile.

"Do you want me to share?"

Chapter-2672: Cursed Wanderer

Sunny and Jet glanced at each other.

"The Dutchman used to pursue you?"

They knew that the House of Night had a history with the ghostly ship and its wraith armada, but were under the impression that it mostly consisted of distant sightings. Then again, Nightwalker had not mentioned his clan… he only mentioned himself, as if the Dutchman had it out for him personally.

He chuckled.

"Oh, yes. It was quite troublesome early on, to be honest."

Nightwalker looked around and smiled.

"Luckily, there is no vessel in the Stormsea that can outrun the Night Garden. So that bastard never managed to get his hands on me."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"But why would it be interested in you in particular? Wait…"

His expression changed subtly.

"Don't tell me that the Dutchman raced to the Eternal City because you were here?"

Nightwalker laughed and shook his head.

"No… you got it backward."

He flinched when an especially loud thunderclap resounded above the Night Garden, followed by a chillingly inhuman howl. Then, grimacing, he added:

"The Dutchman was hunting me down because I had the map to the Eternal City. He always wanted to come here, and I was the only one who knew the way. That is why he pursued me relentlessly for the better half of three decades — not that I ever let him get close. That is also why he did not attack the House of Night after I left. There was simply no reason to, because I took the map with me."

Sunny stared at him in surprise.

"But why exactly did the Dutchman want to come to the Eternal City?"

Nightwalker shrugged.

"How should I know? Sadly, I am not in the habit of talking to sinister apparitions. So, I didn't ask."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a somber tone:

"First of all, you need to understand that the Dutchman… is not a Nightmare Creature. It is, in fact, two Nightmare Creatures who are bound to each other."

Sunny and Jet could not help but look at each other again. Eventually, it was Jet who spoke first:

"Two… bound Nightmare Creatures? Do you mean the ship and its captain?"

Nightwalker looked at her with a smile.

"Bingo! Those two are entirely separate beings, but at the same time, they can never escape each other. They are one and the same."

Sunny frowned.

"I thought you did not talk to sinister apparitions. How do you know?"

Even Cassie had not been able to tell them much about the Dutchman. So how was it that Nightwalker seemed to know so

much?

"It is because the Stormsea is my home."

Nightwalker shrugged.

"And the Dutchman had been haunting these waters for thousands of years. You did not think that Awakened of the waking world were the first ones to suffer his malice, did you? No… there are traces of him, and of stories about him, all over the ruins left behind by the Serpent King's people. To them, he was like a plague."

His expression turned somber.

"In fact, many of those ruins became ruins precisely because of the Dutchman. Oh, but they did not call him the Dutchman, of course. Instead, they called him… what was it? Ah, right. The Cursed Wanderer — a mortal captain who was cursed to wander the sea forever, and therefore became the curse upon the sea."

Nightwalker looked into the distance, then smiled saintly.

"Those ancient people believed that seeing the Cursed Wanderer was an ill omen. If you saw its silhouette sailing in the mist, even from afar, death would come for you soon — something like that."

He paused for a moment and then added in a neutral tone:

"According to legend, the Cursed Wanderer used to be a mortal captain who swore to find the Eternal City and profess his undying love to the Demon of Repose. He sailed the Twilight Sea, searching endlessly, slowly growing weak and old. In the end, desperate to buy himself more time to fulfill his oath, he braved the heart of storms to claim a mythical treasure — the Well of Souls. Only that treasure turned out to be cursed and sealed for a reason, so it claimed him, instead."

Nightwalker grinned.

"That's how it goes with cursed treasure, usually. In any case, the captain became bound to the Well of Souls, but instead of becoming its prisoner, he subjugated it. The Well of Souls became a ship, and

the captain became its helmsman. However, they never reached the Eternal City, and never found Repose, cursed to wander the Stormsea without reprieve, forever."

He shrugged and chuckled quietly.

"Well, that's the legend, at least. It is mostly nonsense, I think… but some parts of it are true. The Dutchman is a kind of well of souls, at least. It's like a nesting doll of horror — the ship consumes souls and enslaves them, then sends them out to slaughter the living and conquer more souls."

His expression dimmed.

"You must have noticed that killing the wraiths does not destroy them; it just sends them back into the holds of the smaller ships. And destroying the ships simply returns them to the Dutchman. From what I know, once it gets you, there is no escape… the souls of a few of my friends are probably still there, among the ghost soldiers of that abominable duo."

Sunny gave him a dubious look.

"You had friends?"

Nightwalker flashed him a menacing smile.

"...Shut up."

He paused, and then added in a dark tone:

"This ship itself is merely a tool. Although its captain is one of the captured souls — I think — he is the true master of the Dutchman. He's the evil will behind the curse that has been plaguing the Stormsea for thousands of years, as well, reaping countless lives and bringing despair to all who see him."

Nightwalker grimaced.

"It is our luck that the Dutchman almost never comes close to the coast. Otherwise, humanity would have had far fewer Citadels."

The battle still raged on, so Sunny did not really have the energy to ponder that strange story seriously. Still, it echoed in his mind, making him feel like there was a kernel of important information hidden in it.

As he pondered, Jet said with a smile:

"I did not feel despair when I saw the captain of the Dutchman, though."

Her smile widened a little.

"All I thought was… hey, that bastard is staring at me. Ah, I want to kill him so bad."

Nightwalker chuckled.

"Well. You'll get a chance soon…"

Chapter-2673: Dreadful Race

Another bridge collapsed into an avalanche of debris, sending countless tons of jagged stone plummeting into the river. When the pieces of the broken bridge froze in the air and moved in reverse, gargantuan tendrils of shadow rose again to hold them back.

Standing in the runic hall of the Night Garden, Sunny grimaced and swayed slightly, his porcelain face turning even paler than usual.

'Ah…'

He was pushing against his limits.

Directly controlling the Shadow Legion was already far more strenuous than what he was used to, and he was manipulating the shadow golems that fired the cannons as well. But it was actually the act of preventing the Eternal City from restoring the shattered bridges that was the most taxing.

Creating a tentacle out of shadows was the simplest form of Shadow Manifestation — in fact, it was the first thing he had manifested after becoming a Master. Sunny was capable of shaping shadows in infinitely more intricate and sophisticated ways now, but he had never used his Ascended Ability on quite that scale.

Only the dome he had built around the Night Garden recently could compare, but that dome only needed to exist. The colossal black tendrils extending from the bow of the living ship, however, had to move, accurately grasp the slabs of stone, and overcome the pull that the sorcery of the Eternal City exerted on them.

The sheer size of the black tendrils was daunting. It was to the point that Sunny found his reserves of essence actually draining for the first time in a long while — an unexpected and unwelcome development that made him frown.

Sunny was not the only one losing essence, either. Aether was swiftly draining his own reserves to maintain the shield of starlight around the Night Garden, and unlike Sunny, he did not have seven soul cores or a Domain supplying him with a constant torrent of spirit essence. He was going to exhaust his reserves far sooner than Sunny would.

They were quite short on time.

Luckily, their dreadful race through the canal of the Eternal City was coming to an end. The Night Garden had not reached the finish line just yet, but the towering silhouette of the Palace was already looming above the horizon like a dark mountain set against the beautiful backdrop of silver light.

The two swarms of the abominable immortals besieging the living ship had grown immense and terrifying, as well. By now, it was as if two slithering walls of hideous flesh surrounded the Night Garden on both sides, with a grotesque mass of limbs, tendrils, and appendages reaching toward it across the deep dark chasms.

The seething waters below were turning strange, as well, having swallowed dozens, if not hundreds, of undying abominations. The Flesh of Kanakht was infecting new hosts there rapaciously, already subjugating and changing them to suit its goals — the main of which was to devour every living soul aboard the Night Garden.

And worst of all, the Shadow Legion kept suffering casualties. Far fewer shades than one would expect in such an unimaginably dreadful battle were being vanquished, but the incremental losses added up. It was not to the point that Sunny had to start worrying just yet, but it wasn't negligible either.

The Defiled Seeker of Truth was already gone, torn apart by the lightning-fast tendrils of hungry flesh. So was the shadow of the Winter Beast, which had already been damaged on the Residential Island. Many of the Obsidian Wasps had been caught and crushed by the fallen immortals, and several of the human Saints were gone...

But the silent shades knew neither fear nor hesitation. Despite the heavy losses, they continued to defend the living ship with a quiet and indomitable determination — and why would it be any different?

The dead did not fear death.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Come on… a little more!'

The Night Garden passed through the cloud of debris left behind by the shattered bridge, and he released his hold on its pieces with a relieved sigh.

"Look alive, Shadow! Starboard!"

Sunny gave Nightwalker a dark look and opened his mouth, wanting to point out that he was technically dead. But Jet beat him to the punch, chuckling quietly.

In the next moment, he got too preoccupied to talk.

An especially massive abomination appeared portside of the Night Garden, and a swarm of fleshy tentacles shot across the canal, threatening to pierce the hull of the living ship. At the same time, the shield of starlight grew a little dimmer, betraying the fact that Aether was approaching his limit, as well.

Then again, maybe he had long passed it — the youngest of the Saints of Night was pale and covered in cold sweat. His face, which had been calm and composed before, was not twisted by a deep scowl. His hands clenched into fists.

'Damn it…'

The Night Garden veered right, creating as much distance between itself and the grotesque tendrils of flesh as possible. The cannons barked, and a rain of enchanted arrows descended upon the towering abomination, tearing it apart. A moment later, the hideous hill of slithering flesh exploded into a horrid rain of blood and bleeding meat, painting the ground red.

And in a few moments more, the Night Garden collided with the foundation of the opposite island, its hull scraping across the stone wall and sending cracks running through it. Cursing under his breath, Sunny sent his Shadows and the strongest of the shades rushing

toward the right side of the ship.

For a few seconds, there was no gap between the ship and its pursuers, and although the starlight cut and burned them, more than a few made their way onto the deck of the Night Garden.

'Curse it all.'

Saint, Fiend, and Serpent descended upon them almost immediately, followed by a coordinated attack of countless shades. The abominations were cut down and thrown into the water before they could do any real damage, but not before slaying several dozen of Sunny's silent warriors.

"Can you go faster?!"

Standing in the runic circle, Nightwalker smiled. His silver eyes glowed like stars in the night sky, and his youthful face seemed to drown in their nebulous light.

"That might be a little dangerous."

Sunny scoffed.

"Does it seem like we're safe now?"

Nightwalker lingered for a moment. Then, his smile widened a little.

"You make a fair point. In that case, I suggest you put your seatbelt on…"

Chapter-2674: Finish Line

"This... is a little thrilling."

The Night Garden flew through the canals of the Eternal City at a terrible speed, conquering their twisting perils with chilling recklessness. With each subtle turn it made, colossal waves crashed into the walls of the surrounding islands, and the thunderous roar of the firing cannons was almost drowned out by the howling winds.

The manner in which the living ship navigated the treacherous expanse of setting water seemed almost suicidal, and yet, it had not been shattered yet. Each turn was made just at the right time, at just the right angle, and just at the right speed. Inertia and acceleration fused into a smooth flow, and the Night Garden appeared light and nimble despite its dauntingly terrifying mass.

The living ship advanced through the maze of canals while leaving scars on them. Its helmsman wasn't shy about using the walls of weathered stone to guide his vessel in the right direction, leaving them cracked and crumbling. At times, he simply crashed through obstacles, making the entire city quake.

'A… a little thrilling?!'

Sunny was forcefully preventing himself from clutching a nearby pillar. Jet was looking at Nightwalker with a strange expression. She almost seemed flustered, sheepishly contemplating her own skill as a helmsman, or if she even had the right to call herself that.

Nightwalker himself, meanwhile…

His beautiful face was illuminated by an easy smile. The runic circle blazed around him, shining with the same light as his silver eyes… his voice, meanwhile, had assumed a strange quality, sounding far more penetrating and vast than any human's voice had the right to

be.

It was as if the Night Garden itself was speaking through him.

Sunny knew that those who were recognized by the runic circle shared their senses with the living ship, perceiving the world as it did. He did not know what it felt like, exactly, but was starting to suspect that there were degrees to this ineffable state of unity.

And Nightwalker was somehow able to delve into that state much deeper than anyone else.

Which was why the ship was still in one piece.

Well… mostly in one piece. There were deep scars covering the entire length of its hull, and its forward mast was tilted at an angle, standing only because Sunny had wrapped the broken section in a layer of manifested shadows.

The Palace was obscuring a vast swath of the sky by now, and the two rivers of abominable flesh had turned into two harrowing seas. The battle had entered a cataclysmic stage, and the Shadow Legion could only hold its ground because there was not enough space for all of the immortal monstrosities to attack it at the same time.

They stood in each other's way, burning with demented fury and slowing both swarms down. The dire speed of the living ship also helped it stay ahead of the great mass of abominations, forcing them to crawl over each other in an effort to keep up the pursuit.

"I have something to say."

Nightwalker looked at Sunny and smiled with the corner of his mouth.

"There is good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

Sunny gave him a scathing glare.

"Start with the… ah, damn it! I don't care!"

Nightwalker blinked a couple of times.

"Alright then. The good news is that we are one turn away from reaching the Palace."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What's the bad news?"

Nightwalker shrugged.

"It's that we're not going to make it!"

Sunny stared at him with wide eyes.

"What the hell do you mean, we're not going to make it?!"

At that moment, a colossal tendril of flesh swiped across the deck, crushing scores of shades and sending several obsidian cannons flying. They crashed down heavily and rolled, vanquishing even more warriors of the Shadow Legion.

Saint's sword cut a black line in the fabric of reality, severing the gargantuan red tentacle. Fiend, meanwhile, grabbed it and tossed it into the slithering mass of abominations across the chasm.

Nightwalker grinned.

"I mean that there's no way to make that turn. We'll hit the wall of the island at an angle that will prevent us from bouncing off of it and continuing on our merry way. Instead, we'll lose all momentum and drift like a turtle, which means that we'll get buried under a mountain of abominations. So, I will have to slow the ship down to a crawl... which will also get us buried."

He shook his head and sighed.

"Unless, of course, there was a way to make the Night Garden turn sharper…"

Sunny stared at him some more, then gritted his teeth.

"Don't slow down. I'll handle it."

Nightwalker nodded.

"Full steam ahead, then!"

Although it did not seem possible, the Night Garden accelerated even more.

They were swiftly approaching a junction of three canals. One of them continued in the same general direction the living ship was headed, while the other turned north at a steep angle.

That was the canal they needed to enter.

As they came closer and closer to the junction, the Puppeteer shifted atop the main mast and opened its colossal wings. With each of them spanning several kilometers, they guided the wind like vast sails — the pressure of the wind would help the Night Garden turn, but it was not going to be enough.

That was why the shadow of Goliath moved at the same time.

Crossing the deck of the living ship with wide strides that made it tremble, the shade of the towering titanic leaned forward…

And pressed its gargantuan palms against the foundation of the island.

As the Night Garden began to turn, Goliath silently exerted all of his dreadful strength to push the ship away from the stone wall, thus making the turn sharper. A net of cracks opened in his arms, slowly growing deeper and wider. And as the titan strained them in one final, dreadful push… his elbows exploded, tearing both of his forearms off.

The bow of the Night Garden turned just enough to guide it into the canal because of that, though.

As tendrils of flesh enveloped Goliath and pulled him off the deck of the living ship, into the flowing mass of slithering flesh, the living ship escaped into the wide canal.

The Palace was straight ahead.

Chapter-2675: Brief Respite

There was a vast expanse of open water between the various districts of the Eternal City and its heart, where the Palace towered like a dark mass of sharp, interconnected spires. It was both beautiful and ominous, tapering to a sharp point — the highest of the spires was like a narrow spearhead thrust into the black sky, its soaring shape outlined by silver light.

It looked very much like the nexus of a celestial city that used to drift in the vacuous vastness of space.

Now that the Night Garden had escaped into the circular lake surrounding the Palace, its pursuers were falling behind. The Shadow Legion received a precious moment of respite.

Sunny, Jet, Nightwalker, and Aether spent a few moments beholding the dark majesty of the Eternal Palace in silence.

"I'll be damned."

Nightwalker exhaled slowly.

"Well… more damned, I mean."

Sunny could not help but smile.

"Have you been inside before?"

Nightwalker shook his head.

"Gods, no. I've never made it this far. The closer you come to the Palace, the more of those bastards wander the streets, and the more powerful they are… and while I am just as immortal as they are, I still had to be careful. After all, I wouldn't want to end up becoming a host to the Flesh of Kanakht myself."

Sunny nodded slowly and looked back at the dark edifice of the Palace.

He considered the situation for a moment.

They were currently south of it, separated by its looming mass from the furious battle between the Dutchman and the abominable immortals in the north. Judging by the distant clamor, the Night Garden had reached the heart of the Eternal City first… but not by much. The wraith army was most likely only an island or two away from making its way to the Palace.

And judging by the eerie silence in the east, the mysterious third contender was not too far away, either.

'Quite vexing.'

Sunny had to make a decision, and the decision he had to make was shrouded in peril and uncertainty. There were many things that he only vaguely understood, and some that he did not know at all. Therefore, any choice he made could only be partially sound, at best.

To start, he did not know the identity of the third contender. Sunny could commit significant forces to facing that frightening adversary… but killing it was meaningless, since the Eternal City would just return the abomination to life. So, it had to be restrained, just like the fallen immortals had been.

Subduing those abhorrent fiends had already been difficult enough, though, and the thing approaching the Palace from the east — whatever it was — seemed far more terrible than they were.

Then, there was the Dutchman and its wraith army. Killing them was difficult as truly destroying his shades, which nothing had managed to achieve so far. Jet, at least, seemed to have the ability to slay the ghost instead of sending them back into the maw of the Well of Souls… or whatever that horror was truly called. But would they stay dead, or would they be revived by the Eternal City as well?

Sunny did not know, but suspected that the wraiths would not be affected by the sorcery of this sunken hell, staying destroyed forever.

That was because they were not living things, to begin with…

What about Sunny and Jet, then?

His expression stiffened.

There were the corrupted immortals themselves to contend against, as well. In fact, at the moment, something unprecedented was happening in the Eternal City. Its dwellers, which had always been scattered across its vast expanse, were now all concentrated in the immediate area around the Palace.

Sunny had brought every abomination from the southern reaches of the cursed city here, the Dutchman had done the same with those who dwelled in the north, and the third contender had pulled all the fields from the east. Now, there were tens or even hundreds of thousands of them in the heart of the Eternal City. That number terrified even Sunny.

He had to defeat the Dutchman, subdue the mysterious abomination in the east, deal with the immortal swarm, find the fragment of Weaver's lineage… and destroy the Eternal City, somehow.

While keeping the Night Garden safe.

Sunny pursed his lips, considering his options for the hundredth time.

In the end…

It all came down to the nature of the Eternal City. Everything was immortal here, which meant that nothing could be truly defeated — that was the cornerstone of all his problems. So, if that cornerstone was removed, the rest of the obstacles standing in Sunny's way would follow like dominoes, falling one after another.

Which meant that his course of action was clear.

He had to stall his enemies and enter the Palace first to find Weaver's lineage. It would be even better if he found the source of the divine sorcery sustaining the Eternal City and destroyed it.

If not, destroying the city itself would suffice.

Sunny took a deep breath, then looked at Nightwalker.

"Circle the Palace from the west and put us between it and the Dutchman's forces."

The wraith army seemed to be closer to reaching the heart of the Eternal City than the unknown horror in the east, so it had to be dealt with first.

Nightwalker lingered for a moment, then nodded and guided the battered ship northwest. The sea of grotesque abominations followed from a distance, rushing across the islands surrounding the Palace — the two vast swarms began to fuse, stretching into a long red line.

As the living ship moved across the vast lake, the towering dark shape of the Palace obscured the battlefield where the army of ghosts fought the horde of deathless abominations. However, Sunny could already see wisps of mist drifting above the water and felt an eerie chill permeating the air.

Soon enough, they were going to escape from the shadow of the towering structure that served as the beating heart of the Eternal City and behold the scene of the dreadful battle.

But before that happened…

Aether suddenly let out a groan and fell to one knee. The shield of starlight illuminating the Night Garden flickered and was then snuffed out, plunging the living ship into a sudden darkness — the light of countless lanterns, which usually seemed bright and vibrant, felt dim and inadequate in the wake of the brilliant silver radiance.

Aether covered his mouth with a hand, blood trickling between his fingers.

"I'm… I'm sorry. I can't…"

He was suffering from symptoms of essence exhaustion.

Sunny looked at him with a somber exhaustion, then sighed and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's alright. You got us this far."

At that moment, Jet spoke from her chair:

"I agree. I am pulling the plug, though."

Her voice was even.

"We had our fun, Sunny, but the Night Garden has no business remaining in these waters anymore. Now, we need to think about the safety of our people and bring them away from this mess."

Sunny looked at her with a frown and remained silent for a while.

Finally, he grimaced and turned away.

"I see your point. I… agree, I guess."

His tone was bitter.

A good strategist had to know how to adapt to the shifting circumstances. And sometimes, being adaptable meant knowing when to cut your losses.

So, as much as it pained him…

Nightwalker looked at them with a surprised expression.

"Huh? Wait… that's it? You're giving up on this battle? On destroying the Eternal City, and all that?"

That would mean that they were giving up on him, as well, but his tone was aloof, betraying no anger or disappointment.

Sunny and Jet both looked at him in confusion.

After a few moments, Sunny scoffed.

"What? Who said anything about giving up?"

He shook his head and smiled faintly.

"No, of course not. We're just switching to Plan B. The Eternal City is

still getting destroyed. If anything… my main concern now is to keep it in one piece long enough to get what I came here for…"

Chapter-2676: Palace Lake

Saying that, Sunny inhaled deeply and looked at Jet.

"Jet."

She nodded and rose to her feet, walking over to the edge of the runic hall.

"I'm on it. I'll need some time to set everything up, though, if we want to do it properly."

Below her, the surface decks of the Night Garden sprawled into the distance, with the silent shades slowly repairing their battered formations. The Dark Castle towered at the bow, and the colossal, eerily motionless shape of the Puppeteer loomed above it all like an eldritch deity.

She looked at the dark skies above the Eternal City, her icy blue eyes reflecting their unfathomable splendor.

Nightwalker frowned.

"What exactly are you doing, though?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Calling in the cavalry."

The beautiful youth blinked a few times, then said in a hesitant tone:

"What the… I thought you were the cavalry."

Sunny smiled.

"I am more of a special reconnaissance and sabotage specialist. A commando, if you will."

He scratched the back of his head.

"Actually, since we're on a ship, I guess I'm a marine. A marine shock trooper? Well, anyway, it doesn't matter. Point is, I am an ardent proponent of refined, elegant, and surgical warfare. Brute force, barbaric carnage, and total annihilation are someone else's forte."

Nightwalker gave him a dubious look at the mention of elegance and refinement, but chose to remain silent.

Sunny went to help Aether to a chair while the Night Garden circled the Palace. Soon enough, they escaped from its vast shadow, and not long after that, Naeve and Bloodwave joined them on the bridge.

"What a sight."

Sunny looked ahead with a somber expression.

Out there, in front of them, a swirling veil of mist obscured the northern reaches of the Eternal City.

The sight of the furious battle raging under the cover of mist was obscured, but they could still feel its horrifying scope, and sense the echoes of its chilling violence.

The tumultuous, billowing torrents of mist were suffused with a ghostly viridian glow that intensified from time to time in sudden flashes, illuminating them from within like bolts of lightning born of a ghostly storm. Rumbling thunderclops rolled across the turbulent surface of the water, and ghastly dark silhouettes were revealed in the ethereal light, moving swiftly in the fog.

Those were the horrid silhouettes of the immortal abominations. The wraiths were indistinguishable from the mist, so Sunny could not see them… he could infer their presence from the movements of the immortals, though: where they rushed, where they were stopped, and there they fell, cut down by invisible blades.

The wraith army had already reached the final island before the lake that surrounded the Palace. Strangely enough, the bridges leading to the heart of the Eternal City were all destroyed, stretching above the water like the broken ribs of a colossal beast — the sorcery of the

Demon of Repose seemed to have no effect on them, for some reason, so they remained broken and shattered.

Sunny wondered if that was the work of Daeron or if the broken bridges were ancient scars left on the Eternal City by Storm God, which even the power of the Demon of Repose could not erase. In any case, it did not matter… he doubted that the deadly waters of the lake would pose an obstacle for the Dutchman and his spectral armada.

The malevolent ship itself was looming in the mist behind its army, half-hidden from view by the deep chasms of the canal it was sailing. Looking at it, Sunny could not help but feel a sudden chill.

He did not know what means the Dutchman was using to subdue the immortal abominations, but the wraiths seemed to be steadily pushing the enemy back. There was an ocean of them washing over the islands of the Eternal City, and the battlefront was stretched across multiple districts, slowly forming a crescent shape around the shores of the Palace lake.

The Night Garden moved across the water until it reached the northern face of the Palace. There, it gradually slowed down and drifted forward at a crawl, standing like a fortress wall between the wraith army and the heart of the Eternal City.

It was then that Sunny shivered, sensing a cold gaze piercing him. He looked at the distant silhouette of the Dutchman, knowing that its captain was staring back.

Forcing out a smile, Sunny gave the ancient abomination a half-hearted bow.

"Take a good look. I am the person who will send your sinister hide to the Shadow Realm."

There was not much time left before the flood of wraiths reached them, though.

"Jet, how much longer?"

She looked at him evenly.

"A bit longer. They are busy on their side as well, you know?"

Sunny sighed.

This was not good.

However…

Had he not promised to give the Dutchman a present?

It was time to deliver the gift.

Sunny smiled.

"The more the merrier, right?"

Just then, the red river that had been following the Night Garden along the shores of the southern islands reached the billowing veil of mist and poured into it, full of demented frenzy.

All the immortal abominations of the southern part of the Eternal City collided with the right flank of the wraith army, joining the undying fiends that had already been fighting there. There were only a few of them at first, but as more and more arrived, the situation on the battlefield seemed to change.

The forces of the Dutchman buckled and were pushed back, causing the entire wing of the ghostly armada to collapse. The mist swirled, and the viridian glow bleeding into it grew much brighter.

Sunny's smile turned into a grin.

"Deal with them before you come bother me, you bastard!"

The Dutchman surged forward, and at the same time, its forces seemed to shift. More wraiths poured toward the collapsing flank, which in turn slowed down the advance of the rest of his forces.

It did not stall the wraith army for long…

But it did stall the wraiths just long enough.

Because at some point, a cold wind blew across the lake.

And a radiant line suddenly split the fabric of the world above it.

Chapter-2677: Light in the Depths

In an instant, a thin white line seemed to cut the fabric of reality. Starting in the air above the highest spire of the Palace, it plummeted down and plunged into the dark waters. A cold wind blew across the Eternal City, and the lake rippled.

For a moment, silence enveloped the world.

Then, the radiant line burst open, expanding into a vast, towering Dream Gate.

For the first time in thousands of years, pure sunshine illuminated the vast expanse of the Eternal City.

Sunny grimaced, shielding his eyes from the bright light. Standing in the runic circle, Nightwalker stared at the radiant rift in the fabric of reality with wide eyes.

"What… kind of Nightmare Gate… how is this…"

Just then, a dark silhouette revealed itself from the blinding radiance, and his eyes widened even more.

"A... a ship? It's a flying ship!"

His tone, which was usually aloof and strangely indifferent, sounded genuinely excited. In fact, it was almost enraptured.

The Chain Breaker appeared high in the dark sky above the Eternal City, the branches of the sacred tree growing on its deck swaying in the wind. A graceful figure stood on its bow, her silver hair fluttering as two white wings shone behind her with a beautiful light. She turned her head calmly, looking down at the Night Garden.

Nightwalker stared at her with wide eyes.

"Is that… an angel?"

Looking up, Sunny smiled silently.

"That is the cavalry."

Turning his head, he gave Nightwalker a scathing look.

"Meet the queen of humanity, old timer. She is also my girlfriend, so pick up your jaw."

Nightwalker blinked a few times.

"That's Immortal Flame's grandkid? Huh. Such a lovely young lady. She does not seem like a complete lunatic, though…"

Sunny coughed, but wisely chose not to comment.

'Ignorance is bliss.'

It was probably better not to mention that her first step on the Path of Ascension had been to set herself on fire, and that thing only got progressively worse after that.

In any case, their reinforcements had arrived.

The Night Garden was battered, and the Chain Breaker seemed in dire need of repairs as well — after all, Nephis had been fighting her own battles in the Death Zones west of Bastion. That campaign had barely ended, allowing the Ivory Island to reach the basin of the River of Tears in time.

The waters of the great river were now flowing into the cold expanse of the Palace Lake. Luckily, the abominations populating the Eternal City could not cross over, since they were imprisoned by its sorcery. The Flesh of Kanakht, meanwhile, was imprisoned by Daeron's seal.

The abominations could not escape their beautiful, nightmarish prison… however, the Night Garden could.

When embarking on the expedition to the Eternal City, the main reason why Sunny had dared to take the living ship and millions of people living aboard it with him was that they could be brought to safety at any moment.

That was because the Night Garden belonged to Neph's Domain, and because it granted her the ability to open her Dream Gate between two points in the same realm. So, if the expedition faced too dire a peril at any point during the voyage, the living ship could retreat to safer waters with relative ease.

All they needed to do was coordinate their escape with Nephis, which was possible because Cassie connected the members of the cohort like a mental web.

Now that the vast swarm of immortal abominations, the Dutchman, and the mysterious third contender were all closing in on the Palace Lake, the peril facing the Night Garden became dire enough to call the retreat — especially because the living ship had already received an infusion of vitality from the Wharf, and because Aether could not protect it with starlight anymore.

So, Jet was right to insist on bringing her people to safety.

That said, the fact that the Night Garden was retreating did not mean that Sunny had to escape, too. Actually, he was determined to stay and finish the job. But since the Dream Gate was already open… why would he not call in reinforcements?

Nightwalker had been staring at the graceful silhouette of the Chain Breaker with glowing eyes. Just then, however, his gaze shifted to the Dream Game, and a stunned expression appeared on his youthful face.

"Wait, what is that?"

Behind the flying ship, another, far greater silhouette appeared in the blinding radiance. Then, slowly, the majestic shape of the Tower of Hope and the Ivory Island revealed itself from the light.

"It's… a flying island…"

Nightwalker studied it for a while, then let out a sigh.

"I once read a report about a deadly region of the Dream Realm that supposedly exists somewhere far north, and is made up entirely of flying islands. I guess somebody reached it, after all."

The Chained Isles had only been conquered by humanity during the crusades led by Anvil and Madoc, so he would have only heard rumors about them before vanishing in the Eternal City. Seeing the Ivory Island must have been a bitter reminder of how the time had passed him by.

Nightwalker lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"So, what powers does your girlfriend possess? No, let me guess. Considering whose granddaughter she is, she has to be a pyromaniac who goes around setting things on fire. Right?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No…"

Nightwalker let out a relieved sigh.

He did not let Sunny finish the sentence, though.

"...actually, she mostly just blows things up."

The beautiful youth paled.

High above the Palace Lake, Nephis regarded the dreadful vista of the sunken city and then turned her head slightly. Sunny could not see, but he somehow felt that she was looking directly at him.

Nephis was indeed fond of solving problems with annihilating explosions. Of course, she was also a powerful healer and someone who could instill her allies with profound strength.

Her Supreme power alone was not going to solve the particular problem facing Sunny and his companions, though — at least not in a decisive way.

Instead, Sunny put his hopes on something else.

There was a moment of silence as the Ivory Island came to a halt, hanging directly above the central spire of the Palace.

And then, the Crushing descended upon the Eternal City.

Chapter-2678: Weight of Hope

The Eternal City was truly vast, not losing in sheer size to sprawling human cities like NQSC, Bastion, or Ravenheart. It was like a region in and of itself, spanning countless kilometers on the glassy black bottom of the Stormsea.

Yet, there was no corner of the sunken city that the Crushing did not reach — except for the Palace Lake, which was spared its fury by its master's design. And since the Ivory Island was flying closer to the ground than usual, the force exerted by the Crushing was truly devastating.

In an instant, every building in the Eternal City was flattened, and every living being on its streets was turned into bloody pulp. Only the Lighthouse seemed unaffected by the harrowing pressure, standing as tall and proud as it used to.

Somewhere in the distance, the Clocktower collapsed once again. On the other side of the city, the Wharf groaned, cracks slowly snaking up its towering walls.

Countless immortal abominations were thrown to the ground and crushed. It was as if they all simultaneously exploded into repulsive puddles of blood and viscera, painting the cracking stone red… their blood flowed slowly, pressed down by the same force that destroyed their bodies.

An entire city full Great Nightmare Creatures was obliterated in a heartbeat.

Ironically enough, it was as if the unfathomable weight of the endless sea that had been held at bay by the invisible aegis protecting the sunken city caught up with it, after all.

The Nightwalker, Naeve, Bloodwave, and Aether paled, watching the

scene of unimaginable devastation in awed silence. Jet remained nonchalant, while Sunny continued looking at the distant Chain Breaker with a smile.

'That's my girl!'

"W—what the hell?"

Nightwalker's voice sounded a little hoarse.

He remained silent for a moment, and then added slowly:

"I guess… you weren't kidding when you said that you'll destroy the Eternal City…"

Sunny sighed.

'If only it were that easy.'

The Ivory Island continued to exert its tyrannical pressure upon the Eternal City. But the Eternal City was not going to just take it lying down…

A few moments after the Crushing decimated it, the vast ruins stirred. The buildings had been crushed into stone dust, and now, that dust was trembling and slowly rising into the air. Small pebbles fused into slabs of stone, and slabs of stone assembled into ornate walls.

The harrowing mass of crushed flesh came alive, as well. Muscles and bones were formed from its ghastly depths, slowly coalescing into human shapes. Still half-complete, the bleeding bodies strained to rise from the ground, pressing against it with raw hands.

But then, it was as if another pulse of the Crushing descended upon the city, breaking their bones and throwing them down again. A few moments later, the abominable immortals were turned into a sea of bleeding flesh once more, and the half-restored buildings were turned into rubble.

Only to be repaired again.

The Crushing and the Eternal City clashed in a harrowing cycle of

destruction and restoration, with neither managing to gain the upper hand. It was as if this sunken hell that had denied death for eons got stuck in an endless loop of dying, unable to escape the horrid agony of its cruel embrace.

That was the sorcery of the Hope, the Demon of Desire, clashing against the sorcery of the Demon of Repose.

By now, even Sunny could not help but feel a sense of awe.

After all, it was not every day that one saw the powers of two daemons collide.

Standing at the bow of the Chain Breaker, Nephis raised a hand. In the next moment, a hurricane of flame descended upon the ruins surrounding the Palace Lake, burning the raging mist away.

Shaking off his trance, Sunny looked at what had been the battle between the abominable immortals and the wraith army of the Dutchman less than a minute ago.

The immortals were a repugnant mess of undulating flesh — not destroyed, but incapable of becoming whole again either. The wraiths, meanwhile…

Countless ethereal figures were standing amidst the ruins, looking back at him in eerie silence.

The spectral soldiers of the Dutchman seemed affected by the Crushing, as well… but their ghostly bodies were not affected by it as much as the abominations were.

A moment later, they moved, struggling against the crushing force to slowly, arduously march forward.

"Damnation."

Nightwalker tore his gaze away from the harrowing visage of the crushed city and looked at him with a distant expression.

"...Now what?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then said darkly:

"Now we take the Palace Island and defend it as if our lives depend on it, while somebody enters the Palace and searches for a way to truly unmake this cursed place. Then, we kill all the immortals, slay the Dutchman, and pat ourselves on the back for doing a good job. Oh, but before that…"

He looked at Jet.

She considered something for a bit, then turned her gaze to the Saints of Night.

"Bloodwave, you have the bridge. Take the Night Garden and Aether into the Dream Gate — you should land safely in the River of Tears. Naeve…"

He shook his head and glanced briefly at Nightwalker.

"I'm staying."

Jet studied him for a moment, then nodded.

"Summon a Memory that can slay wraiths, then."

Sunny threw one last glance at the marching army of ghosts and turned away.

"Everyone who is staying should come with me, then. Bloodwave, Aether… it has been a pleasure. Come find me if you're ever in Ravenheat… or Bastion, or north of the Hollow Mountains. Or if you want to purchase a luxury bicycle. We'll share a drink."

He flashed them a smile. Aether smiled weakly, while Bloodwave looked at him with a scowl and grunted non-commitally before entering the runic circle.

At the same time, Nightwalker stepped out of it.

"How are we getting to the Palace Island without a ship, though?"

Sunny grabbed him by the shoulder and grinned.

"With style."

He used his other hand to grab Naeve, and pulled Jet closer with a tentacle made of shadows.

Then, he pulled them all into a Shadow Step.

A moment later, they appeared on the walls of the Dark Castle. Below them, the sea of shades was vanishing without a trace, leaving the deck of the Night Garden empty.

Sunny looked up, at the distant silhouette of the Chain Breaker, and took a deep breath.

And then, he pulled the entirety of the Dark Castle, with all its immense size and weight, into the shadows as well.

'Argh… how... heavy...'

A moment later, a magnificent black castle suddenly appeared on the shores of the Palace Island. Despite its towering walls, it was easily dwarfed by the gargantuan Palace, looking like a guardpost in front of its gates.

In front of them, the Night Garden rushed across the cold waters of the vast lake amidst the harrowing devastation, approaching the radiant abyss of the Dream Gate.

Chapter-2679: Abandon Ship

The Night Garden glided across the rippling surface of the Palace Lake, rushing toward the Dream Gate.

The abominable immortals were trapped in an endless cycle of rebirth and destruction born from the clash between the sorceries of Desire and Repose; the wraiths were burdened by the Crushing and had not reached the lake yet. Nothing seemed able to threaten the living ship before it escaped to safety.

Until a dark shape suddenly escaped from the dark ruins in the east, where the third contender was still hidden in the darkness, and soared into the sky. Sunny turned just in time to see it fly above the decimated city.

His eyes widened slightly.

'That…'

The dark shape was not an abomination. Instead, it was a piece of a stone wall spanning more than a hundred meters across that someone had tossed into the air. Spinning aimlessly, it flew across the districts of the Eternal City, rising higher and higher.

Needless to say, one needed monstrous strength to send such an enormous projectile flying a great distance — in normal circumstances. Under the tyrannical strength of the Crushing, though, that strength had to be simply unfathomable.

Much more disturbingly, the piece of the wall had not turned to dust as it rose higher into the air. The only explanation Sunny could come up with was that the fragment of a building had somehow been infused with the Will to at least partially deny the power of the Crushing.

It had been aimed quite well, too.

Traveling dozens of kilometers, the giant projectile reached the crest of its trajectory and plummeted down toward the deck of the Night Garden. Before it could strike, however, Nephis pointed at it with her palm. A blinding white ray shot from it and pierced the enormous piece of debris, plunging into the lake a split second later.

The makeshift projectile exploded into a cloud of stone dust and rubble. The lake boiled, as well.

Sunny looked east.

It seemed that the third contender was still some distance away… and it wasn't happy about being late to the party.

'Troubling.'

He frowned, unleashing the Shadow Legion onto the shores of the Palace Island. That was where the silent shades were going to take their last stand, repelling the Dutchman and his army of sinister wraiths.

The only things standing between the two dead armies now were the lake, the radiant Dream Gate, and the Night Garden.

Saved from the giant projectile, the living ship breached the remaining distance to the Dream Gate and plunged into its radiant vastness, slowly disappearing from view. It was as if it dissolved into the light… and Sunny was glad that it did.

He could not help but let out a relieved sigh.

Sunny was happy to see the Night Garden escape. He hoped that the living ship could finish repairing itself somewhere far away, in safety — he hoped that nothing would disturb its peaceful sleep. Now that the civilians were gone, he did not need to feel so anxious, either.

Standing by his side, Jet scratched her head.

"You know, they say that a captain never abandons her ship. No one talks about the ship abandoning its captain, though, do they?"

Nightwalker chuckled.

"Didn't you send your ship away yourself, young lady?"

Instead of answering, Jet let out a satisfied sigh.

"Ah. It feels so nice to be called young again. Being the oldest is such a chore…"

Below them, the battered Shadow Legion was assembling into a formation. Many of the shades were gone, but plenty still remained — in fact, the losses were far below Sunny's expectations since he had abandoned the plan of conquering the Eternal City district by district and simply rushed to the Palace instead.

The Puppeteer returned to its perch atop the Dark Castle. Slayer commanded the defenders on the walls. Saint led the silent warriors on the ground.

The Ivory Island hung above the highest spire of the Palace, and the Chain Breaker was descending from the dark heights.

Soon enough, it reached the battlements above the gates of the Dark Castle, where Sunny and his companions stood. Nephis jumped off its bow, landing near them and illuminating the space around her with her beautiful light.

She looked at Sunny and smiled faintly.

"Fancy meeting you here, Lord of Shadows."

Sunny could not help but smile, too.

"The pleasure is mine. Welcome to the Dark Castle, Lady Changing Star."

The last time Nephis had visited the Marvelous Mimic, it had still been a cozy brick cottage. So, Sunny was a little pleased to show her his new abode… even if it had to be briefly.

They looked at each other, their eyes igniting with a heated intensity. Before Sunny could take a step forward and betray his negative

stance on public displays of affection, though, Jet patted him on the shoulder.

"Alright, lovebirds. Settle down. We have an undying army to kill and an indestructible city to destroy, so there is no time to waste."

The Chain Breaker moored itself to the towers of the Dark Castle, and Cassie joined them on the battlements, flying over by holding to the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. She bowed quietly, greeting Naeve and Nightwalker, and stood beside Nephis.

Nightwalker gave the two of them a curious glance, then pointed to the blind seer.

"Is no one going to introduce me to this stunning beauty?"

His aloof tone was as obnoxious as ever. No... even more so!

Sunny had to take a deep breath.

"The stunning beauty is called Cassia, Song of the Fallen. The last old goat who tried to bother her ended up banished to a remote Citadel in a Death Zone."

The beautiful youth gave him a sidelong glance.

"That's an interesting bit of information you decided to share... without being asked..."

Cassie bowed her head.

"It is an honor to meet you, Saint Nightwalker."

Just then, the mist Nephis had burned away rose from the rubble once again, pouring into the lake. The first of the wraiths reached its shore and froze there, looking across the dark expanse at the rows of silent shades on the other side.

The sinister silhouette of the Dutchman advanced slowly through the canal, nearing the open waters of the lake.

Sunny frowned.

"I guess there really is no time for a touching reunion."

He sighed.

"What a pity…"

Chapter-2680: Last Stand

One of Sunny's incarnations had remained with Nephis in Bastion. However, Nephis left the city and led the Fire Keepers to a Death Zone in the west, where powerful abominations were stirring, driven into a frenzy by the scent of human souls. His avatar remained near the Mirror Lake, though — both to protect the city from the shadows and to watch over Rain.

After all, Nephis could protect herself, while Rain could not. There were members of the Shadow Clan guarding her, yes… but Sunny was too paranoid to feel confident just because of that. As far as he was concerned, there was no telling when an Unholy Titan would decide to suddenly appear in the middle of Bastion.

In fact, judging by how the world usually operated, something like that was only a matter of time. Because of that, he and Nephis had spent these weeks apart.

He had missed her a lot.

'How funny.'

Sunny used to spend years alone wandering the deadly reaches of the Dream Realm and getting himself into all kinds of trouble. But after becoming Neph's lover in Godgrave, he swiftly became domesticated.

Now, his body and soul longed for the familiar comfort of their shared life, and being away from her left him in a state of wistful melancholy.

And now that they were finally together again…

There was an army of undying wraiths standing in the way of their reunion. As well as a city full of immortal Great Nightmare Creatures, some weird thing hiding in the east, and a fragment of Weaver's

lineage he was yet to find.

'Damn it. I'd better deal with the Dutchman and destroy the Eternal City quick…'

As Nephis looked at the spreading mist across the lake, her smile widened a little.

Perhaps it was because she felt his longing, even if he did not say anything.

"So, what is the battle plan?"

Her voice sounded even.

On the distant shore, the wraith army had already reached the lake. The mist was once again suffused with viridian glow, and the ethereal silhouettes of ghostly ships appeared in it one by one. The massive shape of the Dutchman had almost reached the estuary of the canal, mere moments away from escaping into the lake.

The Crushing was still restraining the abominable immortals… but as time went on, there seemed to be something strange happening to the vast, repugnant mess of pulverized flesh they had turned into. Whatever it was, Sunny had a bad premonition about what the near future held.

He inhaled deeply.

"Jet… and Naeve. Join my legion and hold the Dutchman back as long as possible."

Jet leaned on her scythe and nodded lazily.

"Sure. Don't sell us short, though. I'm not planning on simply holding the Dutchman back. I am planning to kill him."

Sunny studied her for a moment, then shrugged.

"Sure. Go wild. Oh… but not too wild."

He gave Jet a poignant look, trying to relay a message…

Do as I say, not as I do!

With that, Sunny turned to Nephis.

"Neph… the creature in the east. Whatever it is, I need you to prevent it from reaching the Palace."

She simply summoned the Blessing.

"It won't cross the lake."

Finally, Sunny looked at Cassie.

"Cas, you will have to be our eyes. We still don't know much about the Dutchman, its captain, the thing in the east, and the Flesh of Kanakht. Try to glean as much about their powers and weaknesses as possible. Now that you are here in person, your powers might be able to tell you more."

Cassie nodded.

"I'll try."

Exhaling slowly, Sunny looked at his companions and smiled darkly.

"I'll leave most of my incarnations to reinforce the Shadow Legion, and send one inside the Palace. Hopefully, I'll be able to dispel the sorcery of the Eternal City there. If not…"

Jet chuckled.

"Don't tell me. We'll die?"

Sunny looked at her in confusion.

"What? No, of course not. I'll steal what I came here to steal, and we'll run away as fast and as far from here as possible."

She grinned.

"Oh. I like that plan better."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"Alright. Then, good luck to us all."

It was a solemn moment… sadly, the mood was ruined by Nightwalker, who cleared his throat loudly.

"Huh? And me? What about me?"

Sunny pulled him to follow and said:

"You're coming with me into the Palace. Don't tell me that you're not dying to know what's inside after spending two decades in this godforsaken city."

Nightwalker let out a quiet laugh.

"Dying to know, huh? Well, you aren't wrong."

A few moments later, Sunny and his companions split up.

Nephis pushed herself off the ground and flew toward the eastern shore of the Palace Island. Jet and Naeve jumped down, joining the formation of the Shadow Legion. Cassie stayed in place, gripping the Quiet Dancer somberly.

Sunny and Nigthwalker, meanwhile, rushed to reach the gates of the Palace.

As they did, the flesh of the crushed immortals all across the Eternal City stirred, and then moved, flowing forward like a viscous red river.

Slowly converging on the lake.

Noticing that, Nightwalker shivered.

"What do you think it's doing?"

Sunny hesitated with the answer.

"I am not sure. It's definitely nothing good, though."

As they descended from the battlements of the Dark Castle and stepped onto the soil of the Palace Island, Nightwalker sighed.

"Do you... think he's going to be okay?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Who?"

The beautiful youth lingered for a moment.

"Naeve. My son."

Sunny spared him a brief glance.

"Yes."

He looked up, at the towering dark edifice of the Palace, and added in a somber tone:

"Because he has someone to return to."

Because Naeve was bound to the world, and to those precious to him, by chains far more firm and inescapable than the Strings of Fate.

Although, perhaps... the two were one and the same.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Let's go."

Chapter-2681: Palace Gates

The gate of the Palace resembled the gate of the Awakened Academy more than it did that of the Dark Castle — it was a single, colossal plate of a strange metal with no visible locking mechanism. However, while the Academy gate was simply an unadorned plate of reinforced alloy, this one was decorated by countless engravings that made it seem like a work of art.

…A destroyed work of art, that was, considering that the titanic plate of metal had been viciously torn and bent, opening into the cold darkness of the Palace Island like a grotesque, jagged flower.

Sunny and Nightwalker paused in front of it for a few moments, studying the sharp edges of torn metal with pensive expressions.

Nightwalker looked up somberly. The jagged expanse of the breached gate towered above them, dwarfing the distant silhouette of the Dark Castle.

"Why does it feel like…"

Sunny finished his sentence in a dark tone:

"Like something broke through this enormous gate from the inside?"

Nightwalker nodded.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Well, if something did, it's good news for us. Isn't it? After all, that would mean that it is not inside anymore."

Nightwalker nodded again, then looked around with a frown.

"Sure. But… did you notice it?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Noticed what, exactly?"

Nightwalker's frown deepened.

"There are no Nightmare Creatures on the Palace Island. It's eerily quiet."

Sunny had indeed noted that strange discrepancy. Up until now, they had encountered immortal abominations on every island within the inner dome. So, he had expected to enter battle immediately after pulling the Dark Castle to the Palace Island — however, nothing attacked them once they arrived.

Even now that the Shadow Legion spread across the entire northern shore of the island, the shades had not encountered a single immortal. The only threat they faced was the approaching wraith army.

He hesitated for a moment.

"It is a bit weird, true. But then again, the bridges are broken."

Nightwalker grimaced.

"Yeah, it makes sense that the immortals would not have been able to get here. At the same time… this damn silence makes you feel like something extra terrible will be waiting for us inside, doesn't it?"

Sunny sighed.

"We've already met something extra terrible."

He lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"It is pretty obvious what broke this gate and where it went, is it not?"

Turning, he looked at the vast expanse of crushed flesh flowing like a river in the distance.

"It was the Flesh of Kanakht. Kanakht was cut into pieces, and each of the pieces was sealed. So… to me, it seems like one of those pieces was sealed right here, in the Palace. In fact, it might have been the first prisoner of the Eternal City. But after the city fell, it escaped."

His expression brightened a little.

"Which must have been a disaster for the immortals who lived here, but good news for us. Because it means that we already met the worst this place has to offer. And it was pretty damn terrible."

Pulling a black odachi from the shadows, Sunny took a step forward.

"In any case, though, I am more terrible. So even if there's something hiding in the Palace, it should be wary of me… not the other way around."

The Darkness of the Palace swallowed him. A moment later, Nightwalker followed with a quiet chuckle.

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While Sunny and Nightwalker delved into the Palace, Jet was preparing to face the Dutchman and its wraith army on the shore of the lake. The rows of shades had assembled into a defensive formation, ready to repel the assault of the spectral warriors — it felt both eerie and reassuring to be among the silent soldiers of the Lord of Shadows.

They were a little creepy, to be honest. There was something deeply unnerving about these creatures, who moved and acted like living beings, but lacked the spark of life. The shades did not seem to possess the sense of self, and neither did they seem to possess a will of their own…

But, at the same time, there was hardly a more reliable army in the world. After all, the shadow warriors did not know fear, were indifferent to pain, and never failed to follow orders. So, Jet could hardly imagine better battle companions.

It was quite ironic that she felt at home in the company of the shadows. A dead woman was going into battle with dead soldiers…

fighting against an army of ghosts in a city of immortals.

There had to be some kind of poetry in that.

"Can we even withstand those wraiths?"

Naeve's voice sounded somber.

Jet smiled.

"Of course. Any other army would have been wiped out in moments, but luckily for us, the main advantage of those bastards — their phantasmal nature — is meaningless when facing the Lord of Shadows. Each of these shadows is a kind of ghost itself, and on top of that, they carry his Will. So, the Dutchman could not have chosen a worse enemy. Oh… that includes me, as well."

She looked ahead.

"A little more, and we can welcome them with ranged attacks."

Naeve inhaled deeply.

"You seem tense, though."

Jet gave him a curious look.

If there was one thing she was good at, it was appearing nonchalant… that was because, in most cases, she simply could not be bothered to worry about things. However, she and Naeve had spent enough time together for him to learn how to read her expressions.

Jet sighed.

"Indeed, I am a little nervous. Not because of the wraiths, though."

Even if there were a myriad of them, the Shadow Legion would withstand their assault for a while. Nephis was here, as well, so if things went south, they would have reinforcements.

There was something that made her anxious, though.

"It is the Dutchman and its captain themselves. That is what worries me."

She looked at the looming silhouette of the cursed ship darkly.

Once the Dutchman joins the battle…

That was when the real trouble would begin.

Jet was sure of it.

She was also anticipating it.

Chapter-2682: Fellow Slayers

The wraith armada advanced across the Palace Lake, followed by a swirling veil of mist. On the opposite shore, the shades waited for their enemy in cold silence, aloof and indifferent to the eerie horror of the vast expanse of viridian glow converging upon them.

Behind the ethereal fleet, covered by mist, rivers of mangled flesh were flowing and swelling like a sea on the eve of a terrible storm.

The battle for the heart of the Eternal City was about to begin.

Jet looked back, at the creepy silhouette of the titanic black moth sitting atop the magnificent castle. She could not see it, but felt the presence of countless strings connecting the dead deity to the silent warriors of the shadow army. From what she understood, Sunny was somehow using the moth to control his legion — therefore, it was their true commander.

Jet found herself playing the role of a simple footsoldier instead of a general. It felt a bit strange, after all these years of being in command, but also liberating. Finally, she could not worry about anything except wielding her blade and slaughtering her enemies.

Like in the good old times.

'How nice.'

She smiled faintly, casting an icy gaze at the approaching armada. Her blue eyes seemed to glow coldly in the darkness of the Palace Island as she beheld its dreadful visage.

'If it were me, I'd begin peppering them with arrows right about now.'

As if reading her mind, a black arrow suddenly streaked across the sky, coming from somewhere on the walls of the Dark Castle. It

breached the distance to the wraith armada in an instant and bloomed into a blinding flash of a strange, radiant, silent explosion.

The light swallowed multiple ships, erasing them from existence.

'Another one.'

Jet grinned.

Even from a distance, she could feel that the ghosts were not merely vanquished and returned to the harrowing cargo hold of the Dutchman. They were truly and utterly obliterated, disappearing forever — just like those slain by her own hands had been before.

She knew who the archer was, as well.

It was one of those few shadows that felt far more willful and sentient than the rest — the quiet, fearsome archer who was always surrounded by the chilling scent of death. Jet had always sensed a kindred soul in her, and now, she had confirmation.

That one was a fellow slayer.

The first arrow was like a trailblazer. As soon as the silent explosion of essence swallowed the vanguard ships, the entire Shadow Legion stirred. Soon, a dark cloud of projectiles rose into the air, raining down on the wraith armada from the black sky.

Sadly, none of them was as deadly as Slayer's arrow. The silent legion of the Lord of Shadows mostly consisted of the Nightmare Creature shadows, and while there were some of them capable of ranged attacks, most abominations only excelled in melee. So, the Shadow Legion was most formidable in a direct clash.

It was probably a good thing, too. It was not difficult to realize that all of these shadows belonged to beings whom the Lord of Shadows… Sunny… had killed. His Domain was built on slaughter and death, so it was a relief to see that most of the shadows he subjugated belonged to Nightmare Creatures. There were some humans, as well, but not too many.

Jet still remembered the chill she had felt when she saw the shadows

of her former acquaintances standing among the silent shades, though. She had not been close to those people, but she knew them — even if most belonged to the Legacy Clans, there had been too few powerful Awakened before for them not to brush sides at least a few times over the years.

Watching the wraith armada shrug off the bombardment and continue its advance without ever slowing down, Jet looked at the Shadow Legion with a complicated expression.

In fact… the shadows of people were not the only ones she had recognized.

There were others, as well. There was Goliath… there was an eerie thing hidden in the veil of snow, too. Jet had never gotten the chance to witness what the Winter Beast looked like, but she was almost certain that it was now dead and a member of the shadow army.

'Too bad. I wanted to kill it myself...'

There were various abominations of the Chain of Nightmares, those who must have come from the Tomb of Ariel, and many more.

Which posed the question: how had the Lord of Shadows come to possess these shadows?

He had been veiled in secrets and mystery from the very start. No one knew where he had come from, or how he came to be as powerful as he was. Nephis and Cassie seemed to trust him, so Jet put his trust in him, too. Plus, the man was quite likable once he took off his mask.

There was something about him that put Jet at ease… a hint of familiarity that made her feel a strange sense of comfort when he was around, as well as a subtle note of unexplainable wistfulness. Maybe it was because he was a fellow outskirt rat, or maybe it was simply because he was immensely powerful and on their side, while possessing a down-to-earth and easygoing personality.

Even if, deep down, Sunny was definitely completely and utterly mad.

Still, the vexing mystery of his existence gnawed at Jet from time to

time. But whenever she tried to think about it deeply, her thoughts seemed to wander in some other direction — most of the time, she did not even realize that there was something amiss with her thought process. Actually, the very fact that she only wondered about his past occasionally was an abnormality.

But there were plenty of anomalies in the world of the Nightmare Spell. There were all kinds of bizarre Aspects, powers, and Flaws.

Take Effie's husband, for example… not even Jet could remember his name, despite how close she was to their family. Maybe Sunny suffered from something similar.

In any case, it was good to have the Lord of Shadows on their side. Jet had wanted to get to know him better for a while now, driven by an inexplicable impulse that was more than simply curiosity, so she jumped at the chance to participate in an expedition with him.

Granted, she had not expected to find herself facing an undying army in the middle of a sunken hell.

Well, no… that was not really true.

Actually, she had expected something exactly like that to happen.

Watching the first wisps of mist reach the Palace Island, Jet smiled darkly.

"I guess it's time to prove once and for all which one of us is the more terrible wraith."

Despite it all, the expedition to the Eternal City promised to be worth it.

Chapter-2683: Master of her Craft

Just before the wraith ships reached the shore of the Palace Island, Naeve summoned a strange Memory that looked like a mass of translucent fabric. Taking a step forward, he spun and tossed the fabric into the air in one smooth, practiced motion.

The Memory soared high, unfolding into a vast net woven out of thin opalescent strings as it did. It glimmered with a shimmering light and expanded like an effervescent spiderweb. The beautiful net was hundreds of meters across, but as Naeve tensed, it grew even more, covering a vast swath of the sky.

Then, it fell on the ghostly ships and blazed with multicolored flames, dimming their ethereal glow.

In an instant, the core of the advancing armada was suddenly swallowed by a beautiful, iridescent inferno. The opaline flames burned above the water and reflected on its surface… it was as if an explosion of vibrant colors suddenly invaded the black and silver majesty of the Eternal City, brightening the somber expanse of the lake.

Of course, what mattered most was not the beauty of the shimmering flames. It was the fact that the spectral ships and the phantoms caught under the net melted in the colorful blaze, dissolving into its radiance.

Compared to the great size of the ghostly armada, these losses were minor — but the opaline net broke the momentum of the first assault wave, buying the Shadow Legion some time.

Looking at the colorful wall of fire burning above the water, Naeve winced and bent down to pick up his harpoon. His indigo eyes

seemed to shine with a dark radiance for a moment.

Jet smiled lazily.

"Where have you been hiding that Memory?"

He sighed.

"It's... my mother's Aspect Legacy. It is a powerful Memory, and could be exponentially so, but it consumes too much essence. There's no point in being frugal anymore, though — this is do or die, after all."

Jet chuckled.

"Don't forget to thank your mother when we get out of this hellhole."

Personally, she was in the exact opposite situation. Naeve had been rationing his essence and was now prepared to burn it all in a final confrontation. However, she had exhausted most of hers and was now hoping to replenish her reserves in the battle against the Dutchman.

Jet had even resorted to consuming the souls trapped in the Mist Blade in order to survive the horrors of the Eternal City… all but one, that was.

The soul of the Heart of Kanakht was too valuable to be wasted that way, so she had chosen to retreat and find safety on the bridge of the Night Garden in order to preserve it.

So, at the moment, Jet felt… hungry.

Looking at the approaching ships, she grinned.

"Stay alive, Naeve."

The Mist Blade assumed the form of a ghostly war scythe.

In the next moment, the dreadful armada was upon them.

Countless wraiths poured from the decks of the spectral ships, landing on the soil of the Palace Island. They seemed to be acting

with some kind of strategy in mind, but whatever their goal was, the Shadow Legion did not give them a chance to implement it — the silent shades advanced, aiming to push the enemy back into the water, where myriads of hungry abominations awaited… even if they would never be able to satisfy their hunger by devouring ghosts.

As it had happened before, the champions of the Shadow Legion led the assault, causing havoc and devastation among the ethereal wraiths. The beautiful statue of a female knight, the towering fiend forged from blackened metal, the formless creature who constantly changed shapes, sometimes turning into a colossal serpent…

'I suppose I am an honorary champion of the Shadow Legion too, today.'

Even if she was of a lower Rank than most of these immensely powerful creatures.

The thought was amusing.

Taking a deep breath, Jet lunged herself into the furious crucible of battle.

Her Aspect was not at all flashy, and her powers were quite simple. Jet could absorb the essence of those she killed, bypass flesh to attack one's soul directly, and augment her body with more essence than an ordinary Awakened could. She could also turn into mist or assume the form of a wraith, and her shattered soul core always continued to grow, one jagged fragment at a time.

After decades of strife and slaughter, it had become quite imposing.

Her enemies in this battle were phantoms, though, so her Awakened Ability — one that had made her the infamous Soul Reaper — was meaningless. So was the Transcendent one, meaning that Jet only had two things going for her.

She was far more powerful than a Transcendent was supposed to be, almost reaching the level of physical prowess one would expect from a Supreme. And she would remain inexhaustible for as long as she kept killing her enemies.

'That is fine.'

People liked to tell tall tales about combat and warfare. There was no end to sophisticated philosophies and profound musings dedicated to the supposed art of battle, making it all seem far more complicated than it truly was. That was because people liked to feel enlightened and elegant even while doing something as barbaric as perpetuating ruthless violence.

But, in fact, there was no art to battle. It was at best a craft, and a very simple one at that — fit for a butcher, not an artist.

And Jet excelled in her craft.

Her craftsmanship was beyond compare, even.

Instantly overtaking the foremost shades, Jet descended upon the disembarking wraiths like a hurricane of ghostly steel. Her war scythe flashed, causing the mist to part before it. The curved blade pierced the chest of a spectral warrior, obliterating it, then slashed in a wide arc to cut another one apart.

As the two wraiths dissolved into ethereal light, Jet used the inertia of the slash to raise the Mist Blade high and then brought it down. Instantly, her somber weapon changed shape, turning from a war scythe into a mundane one. With its blade now extending perpendicular to the shaft, it easily bypassed the block that one of the phantoms tried to make with its weapon and plunged into his head.

In the blink of an eye, three of the Dutchman's wraiths were destroyed.

Jet spun her scythe, deflecting several blows and forcing the enemies to retreat for a moment.

Finally, a refreshing stream of essence flowed into her shattered soul.

Inhaling deeply, Jet looked at the endless sea of eerie phantoms in front of her and smiled. Her icy blue eyes glowed with a chilling killing intent.

"Goodness gracious. There's so many."

It was a real feast.

Chapter-2684: More Bad News

The Shadow Legion engaged the vanguard of the wraith army on the Palace Island, making the ground quake and the lake swell with towering waves. The Dutchman loomed in the distance, drawing closer and closer.

On the eastern shore, Nephis landed gently at the very edge of water and leaned on the Blessing, looking across the lake at the ruined vista of the Eternal City. The mysterious being hiding somewhere among the rubble had not revealed itself yet, slowed down by the Crushing, but it was going to arrive soon.

Cassie stood on the wall above the gates of the Dark Castle, resting her head on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. She had removed her blindfold and was now facing the battlefield, the dying light of Naeve's flames reflecting in her beautiful blue eyes.

Far in the distance, beyond the lake, the repulsive rivers of crushed flesh were slowly converging on a single point.

'Ah… I don't like it.'

Standing in the dead darkness of the gateway of the Palace, Sunny looked around with a complicated expression. He had an ominous feeling that the Flesh of Kanakht had not shown them its worst, yet.

"We should hurry."

Nightwalker raised an eyebrow.

"Hurry where?"

The Palace was gargantuan, taking up most of the island. More than that, it was incredibly tall, with countless spires bound together by a complicated maze of aerial bridges.

The spacious corridor they were currently in resembled an enormous metal tunnel, with no seams between its walls, floor, and ceiling. It was in a state of dire disrepair, with deep scratches covering every surface and an eerie dark mold growing in vast patches here and there. Ghastly black flowers bloomed in the mold, and the air was thick with dust and pollen.

It was as if something enormous had made its way through the corridor once, smearing its walls with blood. The blood then dried up, and eventually gave birth to the sinister mold.

If Sunny could unleash his shadow sense, he could have scouted the entirety of the Palace in an instant. But just like everywhere else in the Eternal City, his senses were suppressed — more so here than outside. He could barely perceive what was a hundred meters ahead of them, and did not feel what was behind the walls at all.

Giving the swirling wisps of pollen a wary look, Sunny ceased breathing and answered in an even tone:

"You're the Nightwalker. Your people are known to be excellent guides, so why don't you guide us to the very heart of this damn place?"

Nightwalker summoned a Memory that resembled a square piece of deep blue fabric embroidered with silver thread, folded it once, and tied it around his neck. Pulling it to cover the lower part of his face, he inhaled deeply and shrugged.

"No problem."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Wait, really? I... was joking."

Nightwalker chuckled.

"I think I mentioned that my Aspect allows me to get to places."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"Lead the way, then."

He had almost expected Nightwalker to sit on the floor, meditate for a while, and then open some kind of mystical portal, but instead of that, the youth simply started walking. Sunny hesitated for a moment, then followed, careful not to step on the disturbingly thick mounds of mold growing on the floor.

He was observing their surroundings with utmost caution, ready to repel any kind of attack. However, even after a few minutes, no abominations lunged at them from the darkness.

Instead, he suddenly heard Cassie's voice in his ears:

[Sunny…]

He frowned slightly.

[Did you learn something about the Dutchman?]

There were a few moments of silence, and then she spoke again:

[No, although I can perceive it clearer the closer it comes. It is about the Flesh of Kanakht.]

Sunny pursed his lips, suspecting that he was not going to like what she was about to say.

[What is it?]

Cassie's voice sounded glum:

[It's evolving.]

Hearing that, Sunny almost stumbled.

[It's what?]

She seemed to sigh.

[I think it has been on the precipice of evolution for a long while. Perhaps it gained something while battling the Dutchman, or perhaps resisting the Crushing served as a catalyst. In any case, it's in the process of evolving from a Great Terror to a Great Titan. And the

evolution is swift… we don't have much time.]

Sunny cursed out loud.

As if he had not already had enough on his plate.

'A damn Great Titan, damn it!'

His expression darkened.

Sunny had yet to battle a Great Titan, let alone kill one. He had spent a long time staring at the Dark Sea of the Forgotten Shore and planning to slay it one day, but that day still remained in the far future.

'It's going to be fine. I killed a Cursed Tyrant once — surely, a Great Titan won't be any worse. Surely. Even if… even if it's immortal…"

His expression fell.

Nightwalker looked at him in confusion.

"What are you cursing for?"

Sunny exhaled slowly.

He remained silent for a moment, then said in a low voice:

"The Flesh of Kanakht. Apparently, it's evolving."

Nightwalker stared at him for a bit, then looked away.

"Ah. Makes sense."

Sunny gaped.

"Makes sense? How the hell does it make sense?"

His guide coughed, then shrugged.

"Well, it's how things go. There is usually a pattern to how Nightmare Creatures evolve, you know? A Demon has to develop unnatural powers to become a Devil. A Devil has to gain authority over lesser

creatures and claim a territory to become a Tyrant. A Tyrant…"

Nightwalker paused for a moment and grimaced.

"You know how Tyrants usually rule over minions, but abominations of higher Ranks don't? That's because they don't need to exert their authority outward. Instead, they internalize it and become a complete being — a force in and of itself, self-contained and self-sufficient. Anyway, Tyrants usually consume their minions to fuel their ascension to Terrors. That's why Terrors and Titans rarely have servants."

Sunny stared at him in puzzlement, wondering how this First Generation fossil had a better understanding of Nightmare Creatures than people of the Third Generation. In fact, those who had become Awakened after the Chain of Nightwares were already being called the Fourth Generation, and they did not know any better either.

In hindsight, what Nightwalker had said made a lot of sense, though. It also correlated with Sunny's own observations.

'Consume their minions, huh…'

"What about Terrors, then? How do they usually evolve into Titans?"

Nightwalker grimaced.

"Terrors usually have only one goal — to spread, to grow. But once they spread and grow enough to reach critical mass, they must do the opposite. They must consolidate themselves and evolve. That is how they become Titans — only, of course, very few ever do. And they need to fuel the final stages of their evolution with an enormous amount of soul essence, so it's usually a massacre of harrowing proportions."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

'Consolidate themselves?'

Strangely enough, it reminded him of how stars were born. Diffused clouds of gas and dust — of matter — had to reach a threshold of density to initiate gravity collapse. Then, in a terrible conflagration of

heat and light, a star was formed by nuclear fusion.

As Sunny pondered that, Nightwalker grimaced.

"The Flesh of Kanakht spread to the entire population of the Eternal City thousands of years ago. I think it only lacked fuel to evolve, and the Dutchman delivered just that to this damn place."

Sunny looked down, fuming.

'That damn Dutchman…'

Taking a few more steps forward, he sighed.

"What the hell. That's cheating. I had to literally descend into the Shadow Realm and kill a dead god to become a Titan."

Nightwalker chuckled.

"Ha. You're a funny one."

Sunny smiled bitterly.

"I'm not joking, though? I wish I were…"

Chapter-2685: Simple Choices

On the shores of the Palace Island, a legion of shadows was drowning in the sea of wraiths.

The lake had become covered by billowing mist, glowing with ethereal light as an endless armada of ghastly ships glided across its waters. There were so many of them that one could travel from shore to shore by jumping from deck to deck; each ghostly vessel carried scores of imprisoned souls in its hold, and as soon as they reached the Palace Island, those souls were sent forth to join the battle.

The island was being swallowed by mist, and the Shadow Legion was being besieged by the horrid tide of wraiths.

Jet had found herself plunging into the familiar heightened state of battle focus. The world had become both simple and profoundly intricate, void of emotions, but full of calculated intent. There was no past or future in that world, only the present moment — only action and reaction, cause and effect, happening so swiftly that they were almost one and the same.

Combat was simple.

It was really the simplest thing in existence, both in principle and by definition. That was because combat only had two components — choice and execution. Execution was a foregone issue of matching action to its intent, while choices were easy to make by always striving for optimal efficiency.

Efficiency of movement, efficiency of emotion, efficiency of thought… the most efficient move was always the most economical, the least wasteful, and therefore it was always the simplest. Made up of these simplest choices, combat was simplicity itself.

Perhaps such an approach was not very elegant, but then again, the

same people who critiqued Jet for lacking refinement were the first ones to tremble at the sight of her blade.

So who cared?

She definitely couldn't give less of a damn. The only thing that mattered was slaying the enemy and staying alive… well, alive-adjacent, at least.

'Haa…'

Jet felt very alive at the moment.

That was because the Mist Blade had reaped countless lives — or whatever the wraiths possessed instead of lives — and raging torrents of essence were pouring into her starved soul.

With every phantom she destroyed, more jagged fragments were added to her shattered core, as well. Jet was a veteran of countless battlefields, but she had never reaped such a bountiful harvest of powerful souls. It would have been exhilarating if it weren't so daunting… if she had the capacity to feel exhilaration while coldly making an endless amount of optimal choices.

Time flowed slowly, each moment encompassing countless actions. Jet, meanwhile, moved with the speed of lightning — or maybe with the speed of the last electric impulse that traveled through the nerves of the dying before they were embraced by darkness.

There were wraiths all around her. Their ghostly bodies were ethereal and insubstantial, but that did not mean that their weapons could not cut her, could not bring her down. So, she had to stay ahead of an endless avalanche of fatal blows — either by staying on her toes and being faster than death, or by killing those who aimed at her faster than they could kill her.

The Mist Blade was like a vicious and mercurial predator, sometimes biting like a stinger, sometimes cutting like a scalpel, sometimes turning into a shimmering sphere of slaying steel around her. Scores of wraiths had already fallen to her blade, and scores more would follow soon… a startling massacre even by her standards, especially

considering how powerful these sinister phantoms were.

And yet, it was a drop in the ocean.

The champions of the Shadow Legion — the living statue, the steel demon, the serpentine shadow — were in similar situations. The silent shades were holding ground against the tide of ghosts, but their number was slowly diminishing, while the army of the Dutchman seemed endless.

The murderous archer was still raining down death and destruction from the walls of the Dark Castle. Naeve was still alive, and even doing well. He had found himself fighting side by side with a shade of a tall warrior who was clad in splendid armor and wielding a fearsome spear, displaying might worthy of a Supreme. They made for a deadly and strangely harmonious duo, thriving in the chaos of battle.

But there were simply too many enemies for them to slay.

'Just how deep is the Dutchman's hold?'

How many souls had that fiend swallowed and subjugated over the ages?

And where had it come from?

Jet did not really believe the story about a lovesick captain and a cursed treasure he had found. The Demon of Repose was not someone who inspired love — she was someone who inspired terror. She was the very definition of the saying that there were worse things than death. Similarly, the captain of the Dutchman did not seem like someone who had been blinded by affection.

He seemed like someone who had been blinded by a callous, malignant hunger for power. Someone who had sacrificed his soul in pursuit of a clear and sinister intent.

Jet knew people well — all too well, really — and she especially knew those who lusted for the corruption of power. She had only looked the captain of the Dutchman in the eye once, but it was enough to recognize what kind of being he was.

'What is that bastard doing, anyway? He should be halfway across the lake by now…'

Jet leaped back to create some distance between her and the nearest wraiths for a brief moment, then looked into the distance.

There, hidden in the mist…

Her eyes narrowed.

Just then, the looming silhouette of the Dutchman vanished. No… it did not disappear. Instead, it turned into an eerie cutlass and fell into its captain's hand.

Jet knew that because the captain of the Dutchman soared into the air in a stunning leap, breaching the remaining distance to the Palace Island and plummeting down in a whirlwind of viridian glow.

A moment later, he landed in the shallows, rising a plume of foaming water, and cast the indifferent gaze of his harrowing, sea-colored eyes at the struggling shadows.

Jet pursed her lips.

'Crap...'

Chapter-2686: Twisted Truth

"Crap!"

Sunny stumbled and leaned on the metal wall of the vast corridor to keep his balance. Sadly, there was mold growing on that wall, and as soon as his hand touched that mold, it started growing through his skin, too.

Sunny stared at his hand, which was swiftly becoming something horrifying, then grimaced as he felt Blood Weave attacking the swiftly spreading mold with ferocious hunger. Not wishing to suffer the agony much longer, he turned his entire arm into a shadow, watched the disgusting black growths fall to the floor, and stomped them.

Then, he made his arm tangible again, surreptitiously summoned the Mantle, and encased himself in a carapace of black jade.

The Handy Bracelet was still whispering into his ear by the time he did:

[Your shade has been destroyed.]

[Your shade has been destroyed.]

[Your shade has been…]

Sunny's expression turned somber for a moment.

'So, it finally happened.'

He had finally met a being who could irrevocably obliterate his shades.

The immortals of the Eternal City and the spectral warriors of the wraith army had failed to truly vanquish even one, but as soon as the

captain of the Dutchman descended upon the Shadow Legion in person, wielding his ghostly viridian cutlass with practiced skill, a dozen of them were destroyed in an instant.

The bastard was strong.

In fact, he was terrifying.

And that was not even Sunny's greatest problem, at the moment.

Nightwalker turned back to look at him questioningly.

"What happened?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"It's the captain of the Dutchman. He joined the fray. And he's… a familiar face."

Of course, Sunny had recognized the sinister fiend instantly. He changed a lot from the last time he had seen him, being a wraith and a Nightmare Creaturer on top of that, but it was difficult to mistake him for anyone else.

The captain of the Dutchman was…

[Sunny! I know what the Dutchman is.]

Cassie's urgent voice made him sigh.

So, Sunny had recognized the captain of the cursed ship, while Cassie had gleaned what the ship itself was.

'How convenient.'

He inhaled deeply, a dark expression twisting his face.

The helmsman of the Dutchman was none other than the bronze-skinned sea captain who had been one of the Nine.

'The Nine again…'

He frowned.

Their malignant traces seemed to be everywhere in the Dream Realm, often turning into obstacles standing in Sunny's way.

Was the ill-fated relationship between them and Weaver still pursuing Sunny even after he became Fateless?

Or was it simply that anyone who sought the heights of power had no choice but to stumble onto the echoes of their unspeakable sins?

Regardless, he would have been happier to learn that the captain of the Dutchman had turned out to be some Cursed abomination than a corrupted ghost of one of the Nine. Having faced Slayer in battle, Sunny could not help but feel phantom pain at the prospect of facing another.

He let out another sigh.

[What the Dutchman is? Well, go on, tell me.]

Cassie answered in a moment:

[The Well of Souls… it's the Soul of Kanakht.]

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

Suddenly, a few pieces of knowledge clicked together, giving meaning to many of the mysteries of recent days. It was not a confirmed theory, exactly, but he had a strong feeling that he was on the right path.

'The Soul of Kanakht… the Flesh of Kanakht…'

Nightwalker told them that the Dutchman had been hunting him for decades because the map to the Eternal City was in his possession. And that old legend about the Well of Souls told the tale of a lovesick captain who had spent a lifetime searching for the Eternal City out of one-sided love for the Demon of Repose, only to be damned instead.

But what if the truth had been twisted?

Eurys of the Nine had been sent to infiltrate the Empire of War. Aletheia had been sent to uncover the lies of the gods. Auro had

received a mysterious mission that was supposedly the most harrowing of them all.

But what about the other six?

Orphne had been sent to kill Weaver. Aemedon had been sent to Nether, so that Nether could rally his siblings and start the Doom War. Omer had been sent to convince Mirage to join…

Those were three of the Nine, receiving tasks having to do with three of the daemons.

Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that the Nine had plans for the rest of the daemons, as well?

Dread, Desire… and Repose.

'No, wait. Am I forgetting one?'

Sunny frowned, then shook his head.

If the captain was not in love with Repose, but instead needed to get close to her to accomplish his mission, then the quaint legend gained a far more sinister meaning.

And as to why he would seek out the Soul of Kanakht, sacrifice himself to it, and then subjugate it instead… why, Sunny could come up with any number of explanations.

The simplest of them was a desperate need to gain power. After all, the Nine had been meant to help the daemons win the Doom War, and for that, they needed to walk far on the Path of Ascension. And while they were all Fated, not all of them were Orphne, who had become someone who managed to kill the Demon of Fate twice out of sheer grit and determination. Some would have needed to seek out shortcuts to might and power.

Fusing with the soul of a Supreme cursed to immortality by Shadow God would have been one such shortcut.

It had worked so well, in fact, that the Dutchman and its captain survived the Doom War… while neither the gods nor the daemons

did.

However, they had not survived it unscathed.

They had both fallen into the vile depths of Corruption.

Sunny scowled.

'How much of that man is even left by now, after thousands of years of being corrupted?'

It wouldn't be much.

Which posed the question of why that fiend was still so obsessed with the Eternal City.

The answer to that question was quite obvious, though.

It was because the Flesh of Kanakht was here.

He had already subjugated the Soul of Kanakht, but once one tasted power, no amount of it was ever enough. So, maybe the captain of the Dutchman had grown dissatisfied with being a dreadful wraith.

Maybe he wanted to gain a dreadful body, too.

'Ah, damn it all.'

Sunny cursed under his breath.

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine.

'No, wait. No way...'

The Flesh of Kanakht and the Soul of Kanakht were currently here, in the Eternal City.

But wasn't the Heart of Kanakht here, as well?

Slain and trapped within Jet's Mist Blade.

And if three of the ancient fiend's parts were here…

Then Sunny had a suspicion about what the mysterious abomination in the east was, as well.

Chapter-2687: Mist Front

The captain of the Dutchman cleaved the formation of the Shadow Legion apart in an instant. The silent shades, which had seemed indomitable before, fell to his ghostly blade like autumn leaves. A moment later, the wraiths followed their commander into the breach, causing the dark phalanx to buckle.

'Not good…'

Ordinary shades had no chance in a clash against the sinister apparition. The champions of the Shadow Legion, meanwhile, were either too far away or preventing other sections of the formation from falling.

Jet was the closest.

Cassie was already whispering into her ear, relaying the new information about the Dutchman and its captain. Much stranger, though, was the fact that she heard the voice of the Lord of Shadows resounding in her other ear at the same time.

He said:

"You need to buy me time."

Jet regarded the captain of the Dutchman for a split second.

'Gods.'

Somehow, it felt like he was coming directly for her.

"Sure… no problem."

Her voice was even. Hearing its nonchalant tone, the Lord of Shadows let out a nervous laugh.

"At least one of us is calm, I guess. In any case, four of my incarnations are spread out around the battlefield — they are augmenting my warriors while suppressing the enemy. The Shadow Legion might be wiped out without them, but if you need me, I'll manifest them as avatars and come after the bastard myself."

Jet smiled darkly.

So, he was offering his help?

'How caring.'

"No need."

She paused for a moment, and then added in something that almost resembled hurry:

"I mean, no need for now. Let's see how things go fist... if you see me getting absolutely destroyed by that thing, do come rescue me posthaste."

She could not see Sunny, whose voice seemed to be resounding from the shadows, but suspected that there was a grin on his needlessly handsome face at that moment.

"Deal."

Cassie had finished talking, as well, which meant there was no more time to waste.

'To hell with it.'

Jet tuned into mist.

Flowing between the silent shades like a torrent, she enveloped the battlefield and surrounded the great wraith from all sides.

His cutlass glowed in the fog like an ethereal beacon, drowning the world with its ghostly chill.

Then, two icy blue lights ignited in the mist.

That was Jet assuming her human form. Taking a step forward, she lowered her war scythe and looked the Cursed Wanderer directly in the eye.

She smiled faintly.

"I am the captain of the Night Garden, Soul Reaper Jet. I was told to hold you off."

The captain of the Soul of Kanakht looked quite like a man up close — well, a ghost of a man, at least. He wore the tattered remnants of a lavish robe and a spectral chainmail underneath. His long hair was swept back and tied into a careless knot, revealing a narrow forehead. His skin would have been bronze if it weren't ethereal and translucent, suffused with a pale glow.

No one would have mistaken him for a human, though, because of the monstrous madness burning in the depths of his cold, inhuman eyes.

Jet's smile widened a little.

"But where's the fun in that? I think I'll just kill you instead."

With that, she lunged forward.

The captain of the Dutchman — the Cursed Wanderer — was not particularly powerful. In fact, he was a mere Corrupted Devil, or so Cassie had told. However, he had conquered and subjugated the Great Tyrant, Soul of Kanakht, and stole its power.

It was a strange situation where a minion of a powerful Tyrant had come to rule his master.

'Stranger things have happened…'

Jet was a Saint who rivaled Supremes in terms of physical prowess, while the Cursed Wanderer was a Devil who had taken the power of a Great One for his own. They were supposed to be, if not equal, then at least existing in the same realm.

However, practice was woefully different from theory.

As soon as Jet attacked, she could feel a terrifying wrongness to it all. The timing felt off, and the space seemed twisted subtly. Her body was not responding to her commands as flawlessly as it should have, and her aim was slightly off. She was moving slower than she had expected… her attack was weaker.

It was as if the world itself was resisting her and aiding the abomination.

That felt suffocating. Jet could only compare it to how it had felt to be in the presence of powerful Saints as a mere Awakened. Their mystical presence had been like a physical pressure, threatening to send her falling to the ground.

Similarly, the great wraith before her was exerting pressure.

She knew what that pressure was, as well. It was the Will — the mysterious, yet palpable force that those of the higher Ranks knew how to wield.

Sadly, although Jet was as strong as a Supreme, she was not a Sovereign. She could not even begin to imagine how to harness her own nascent Will, let alone how to use it to suppress the influence of a far more ancient horror.

But that was alright.

'Corruption must have rotted his brain.'

Having the Will was neat, but the captain of the Dutchman seemed to have forgotten a simple fact — the simplest fact, really.

In a battle between two skilled warriors, the one wielding a longer weapon usually won.

'Who asked you to turn the Soul of Kanakht into a cutlass, idiot?'

Despite the world itself working against Jet, her war scythe reached the sinister apparition long before his sword could get anywhere near her.

Granted, she was slower than she had hoped, and her aim was

slightly off. But it still forced the Cursed Wanderer to block her blow with the blade of his ethereal cutlass.

Jet had seen how easily that horrid blade cut down the shades, severing their inky-black bodies as if meeting no resistance. After all, it was the Soul of Kanakht — a being far more ancient and powerful than they were. A remnant of a dreadful fiend who was almost as old as existence itself.

But when the Soul of Kanakht met the Mist Blade…

A crack appeared on its surface, and the Cursed Wanderer reeled back.

Finally, his mask of indifferent malice was lifted, revealing a rare moment of confusion and shock.

Jet grinned.

She was the Soul Reaper, after all. Her Aspect allowed her to deliver tangible attacks to intangible souls.

So why would anyone try to block her attacks… with the Soul of Kanakht?

Chapter-2688: Third Contender

The Cursed Wanderer had not remained rattled for long. In fact, his shock only lasted a split second — then, he coldly pulled his cutlass away and moved forward, aiming to slip past the Mist Blade. He was so fast that time seemed to slow down to a crawl, with wisps of mist suspended in the air and unmoving.

Of course, Jet was just as fast.

…Almost.

She retreated at the same pace as he advanced, coldly calculating the odds. The shaft of her war scythe was long, so if she could just keep him at an optimal distance, the advantage would be hers. Conversely, if the sinister apparition got too close, she would die.

So, there was no way that she would allow him to move past the blade of her scythe.

'It is a bit funny, really…'

Here she was, fighting an edritch horror in the heart of an eternal hell. And yet, the same principles that she had learned during her clumsy training spars at the Academy could still decide the outcome of this fight.

A thorough mastery of the basics had never let her down.

The Mist Blade moved with swift and deadly precision, aiming to behead the great wraith. Usually, an enemy would have been able to easily deflect or block such an unsophisticated attack, but the Cursed Wanderer was wary of letting the Soul of Kanakht touch the ghostly scythe — so, he had to evade instead.

And to do that, he had to give up on his attempt to get closer.

Jet smiled.

'Why are you running away, though?'

This time, it was the sinister apparition who retreated a step, and it was she who advanced.

For a few moments, the two of them turned into a whirlwind of mist and cold steel, both aiming to cut the other down. The ground of the Palace Island cracked under the strain of their clash, and the surrounding shades had to retreat lest they be destroyed.

The advance of the wraith army stalled and then halted. The broken formation of the Shadow Legion received a chance to repair itself.

But before it could, the whole island suddenly quaked, and a blinding flash of white light illuminated the sky behind the Palace.

Jet briefly glanced east.

'Nephis…'

It seemed that the third contender had finally arrived.

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Shortly before, Nephis stood on the eastern shore of the island, leaning on the Blessing. The turbulent expanse of the Palace Lake stretched before her, and on its other side, the ruins of the Eternal City were locked in a constant cycle of destruction and restoration.

The rubble was obscured by billowing clouds of black dust, and something was moving there, under its veil.

Getting closer.

What could it be?

Nephis did not know, but she felt something that she had not experienced in a long while…

It was a hint of fear.

The cold, insidious tendrils of fear crawled from under the wary apprehension that was familiar to her, making her heart ache.

'How strange.'

Was there still something in the world capable of frightening her? Even if there was, she saw no reason to assign that meaning to the unknown abomination hiding in the black dust. So why was she afraid?

'Am I under some kind of mental attack?'

Nephis frowned.

Surely, that had to be it. She wouldn't experience fear otherwise.

'Let's see what that abomination is, then.'

She raised the Blessing, intending to channel her flames and burn the dust away. But just before she could, a vague silhouette finally appeared from the dust.

It was the thing Nephis feared.

A man wearing a tattered spacesuit walked across the ruins while holding his hands behind his back. His face was obscured by the visor of the round helmet, but she could glean desiccated flesh through its cracks.

The man halted for a moment at the edge of the water, then stepped on it lightly and walked leisurely across the surface of the lake.

Neph's eyes narrowed.

She remained motionless for a bit, too, then quietly rose into the air.

Flying to the middle of the lake, Nephis hovered just above the water, holding the Blessing pointed down.

The strange man continued to walk until he was only a few dozen meters away from her, then stooped, looking at her from beneath the cracked visor of his helmet.

There was silence between them for a while.

And then, a low, croaking laugh resounded from the tattered helmet.

"Little Nephis, my lovely girl. You're all grown up."

Nephis did not answer. Then man studied her for a bit, then raised a hand tentatively, as if wanting to touch her.

His hand fell powerlessly back a moment later, though.

"Won't you say hello to your uncle Aster?"

His voice almost sounded... hurt.

Nephs stared at him silently. Then, a faint smile twisted her lips.

"Is this what you think I fear?"

The man shrugged slowly.

"Love, hatred, fear, courage… aren't they all human emotions? But we are not humans, you and I. We have never been human, and we certainly never will."

Nephis chuckled joylessly.

"Ah, I see. I guess that is what I fear, as well."

With that, she took a deep breath and stared at the man coldly, white flames igniting in her eyes.

"It was a good attempt… but you are not Asterion."

She tilted her head a little, and then added in an aloof tone:

"Although now that his name has been invoked, I guess he will be watching."

Raising the Blessing once again, she pointed it at the man in a tattered spacesuit and said evenly:

"Let him see, then. So, what are you, really? The Mind of Kanakht?

The Thoughts of Kanakht? The Folly of Kanakht, maybe?"

The man laughed.

"Ah… a nephilim. Of all the creatures in the world, why did I have to meet one of your vile kind?"

Taking a step forward, he suddenly seemed to lose shape, becoming vast and unfathomable.

"What am I? Oh… the Madness of Kanakht. That's what they called me."

Nephis nodded somberly.

"I see. Well, then…"

The blade of the Blessing shone with a blinding radiance, and the water of the lake boiled under the immolating heat.

"Get the hell out of my head."

In the next moment, the world exploded into a harrowing, pure, merciless white inferno.

Chapter-2689: Eternal Engine

The Palace was an eerie and inhospitable place. The smooth metal corridors stretched endlessly, filled with nothing but destruction, eerie black growths of mold, and spores. Nightwalker seemed quite confident as he navigated their complicated maze, but it almost felt like he was choosing directions at random.

Sometimes, they would go up, and sometimes, they would go down. Some corridors were angled at a steep incline, some opened into bottomless wells. Some were filled with unrecognizable debris, some were empty.

In any case, the longer they spent inside the Palace, the less Sunny was convinced that it was a place where a daemon had lived. The unidentifiable debris could have been furniture, true, but it looked more like broken pieces of esoteric machinery. There were no spaces fit for mundane activities. The layout was… inexplicable.

It felt like they were traveling the metal bowels of a giant, dead beast.

Sunny had been to several strongholds that belonged to the daemons. They were all subtly strange, as if built for someone who was similar in shape to a human, but not quite the same — except for the Tower of Hope, whose master had lived among humans and favored them. The Ebony Tower, the Jade Palace, the Mirror Castle, and the Night Garden all shared that trait, though.

The Palace of the Eternal City was entirely different. It seemed more like a complicated mechanism than a home.

Perhaps it was.

After all, the Eternal City was basically a colossal space station. It had been created to exist in the vacuum of space, so it would make sense

that there was a sorcerous engine at its heart.

Sunny could just imagine how the Palace had looked when the Eternal City drifted among the stars. It would have shone brightly with silver light, powerful torrents of stellar flame and soul essence rushing through these corridors…

The Palace was dark and lifeless now, though.

Still… that did not mean that its sorcery was gone.

"What is happening out there?"

Nightwalker's voice sounded a little glum. Sunny hesitated for a moment, then allowed himself to take a breath and used the air he inhaled to answer.

"The wraiths are pushing my shadows back. Jet is fighting the Dutchman and its captor. Oh… the Dutchman is the Soul of Kanakht, as it turns out. Nephis is fighting the Madness of Kanakht."

Nightwalker stared at him silently, which prompted Sunny to add:

"Naeve is still in one piece."

His guide turned away and grunted quietly.

"Well… everything seems to be under control."

Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"Does it? I guess it is — for now. Sadly, one guest is yet to arrive."

The Shadow Legion was holding back the wraiths, Jet was holding back the Soul of Kanakht, and Nephis was holding back his Madness. All three battles were precarious, hanging in a delicate balance… but that was fine.

What was not fine, however, was that the Flesh of Kanakht continued its evolution as they spoke. And once it became a Titan, the fragile balance would be instantly shattered.

'Not to mention if the pieces of Kanakht somehow merge.'

That'd probably be an unmitigated disaster.

Body, Soul, Mind, and Spirit. Those were all the parts of a living being Sunny knew of, except for the final one — Shadow.

The Flesh of Kanakh, the Soul of Kanakht, and the Madness of Kanakht constituted the first free. The fourth one — the Spirit — was with Jet in the form of the Heart of Kanakht. A part of that Devil was bound by the Mist Blade, while some of it had been fused with her shattered soul core.

The Shadow of Kanakht was missing, but then again, it was not supposed to exist. After all, Kanakht had been cursed by Shadow God. A person's shadow was their death… so would a deathless being possess one?

Eurys did have a shadow, but it had felt like a hollow and lifeless thing — like a shadow of an object, not of a living being.

What was going to happen if the other parts of Kanakht merged? Would that ancient fiend be reborn?

'That'd be suboptimal.'

Sunny did not even know how to deal with the Flesh of Kanakht after its evolution, let alone the entirety of that undying bastard.

So, it was in their best interest to prevent all parts of Kanakht from coming anywhere near each other.

"It's a bit funny though, isn't it?"

Nightwalker raised an eyebrow.

"What is?"

Sunny shrugged.

"That we went on this expedition to find the wharf, the lineage of Storm God, the trace left behind by a nebulous daemon… and some

treasure, of course. There are so many things to be gained in the Eternal City. But the other two forces that reached it actually came for the monsters guarding the treasure, instead."

The captain of the Dutchman and the Madness of Kanakht did not care about all the things that Sunny had wanted to take. All they cared about was the Flesh of Kanakht, which was why they had entered the deadly race to the Eternal City.

Time was of the essence.

"How far are we from our destination, anyway?"

Nightwalker lingered for a moment.

"We're here."

Before Sunny could feel surprised, they stepped into a vast hall. It was unlike any of the intersections they had passed before, circular in shape and grandiose in size. A deep pit took most of its expanse, surrounded by giant shards of a violently torn metal plate… almost like a bowl with a broken lid.

Or a prison with a broken seal.

The hall was dark and empty, like the rest of the palace. The mold was much thicker here, and wisps of grey fog drifted above the floor.

Just before Nightwalker stepped into the fog, Sunny grabbed his collar and pulled him back.

"Don't touch that fog if you want to live."

Nightwalker frowned.

"Why? What is it?"

Sunny looked around and answered in a distant tone:

"It's nothing."

Ignoring Nightwalker's confusion, he studied the heart of the Palace

with a dark expression.

Eventually, a pale smile appeared on his face.

"I guess we found the cage where the Flesh of Kanakht had been locked."

Chapter-2690: Empty Cage

The Demon of Repose had once helped overthrow a being that was as old and eldritch as her — Kanakht, one of the original humans born from the sparks of the Flame of Desire, bearer of the Shadow God's curse, and the king of the first human kingdom.

The first Human Domain.

She was most likely the one who had separated him into pieces and sealed each piece away, as well. The Eternal City had held one such seal — in fact, containing the Flesh of Kanakht might have been its original purpose.

Now, the Eternal City had fallen from the Black Skies, and the seal was broken.

Sunny was looking at the torn fragments of its lid right now.

Nightwalker blinked a few times.

"Nothing? What do you mean by nothing?"

Sunny sighed.

"Well… daemons were never above stealing. Nether in particular felt comfortable lifting any useful idea that had been carelessly left laying around, be it by his siblings or the gods. It seemed that the Demon of Repose took a page out of the divine book, as well."

Carefully avoiding a wisp of grey fog, he added:

"Nothing is what the gods used to seal the Void. It is like… a layer of insulation between the Void and the bars of its cage. A state of absolute non-existence. Touch it, and you'll be erased from existence, as well."

He looked at Nightwalker and smiled.

"Unless you're someone amazing like me, of course. I once spent close to a year enduring nothing. It was a terrible experience, so I do not recommend."

Walking to the edge of the vast pit where the Flesh of Kanakht had been kept, he looked inside and grimaced.

The mounds of repulsive mold growing inside resembled eerie black hills, with strange flowers opening their meaty petals at the sound of his steps.

A deep frown slowly settled onto his face.

Nightwalker remained silent for a while, then asked:

"Uh… now what?"

Sunny looked at him darkly.

"Are you sure that this is the heart of the Palace?"

His youthful guide nodded.

"Quite sure."

Sunny looked away and scratched his head.

"Then I have no idea. Yet."

The battle was raging outside. Jet was barely staying alive, and Nephis was fighting an ancient fiend proficient in mind attacks. No matter how formidable her mental defenses were, that made Sunny nervous.

He had to solve this puzzle quickly.

Nightwalker stared at him with disbelief.

"That's it? You had no plan?"

Sunny frowned.

"How was I supposed to concoct a plan without knowing anything about what sorcery Repose used to create the Eternal City? I had reasons to believe that I'll be able to dismantle it, okay?"

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"A long time ago, I taught myself Weaver's sorcery to interfere with the sorcery of Hope. I was merely an Awakened back then, knew close to nothing, and was sitting alone in a cage. Needless to say, I am vastly more powerful now. I know far more, can do far more, and have become a far better sorcerer. I also have the council of others like me. So, I should be able to at least break whatever sorcery the Demon of Repose left behind."

Sunny threw another glance into the pit and sighed heavily.

"The problem is that I need to lay my eyes on the inner workings of that sorcery first. Do you see the problem?"

Nightwalker hesitated a little, then looked around.

"There's nothing here. Everywhere we've been inside the Palace is the same… dead, and empty."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"Yes. Quite ironic, to find nothing but death and emptiness in the heart of an immortal city."

He remained silent for a while, then closed his eyes.

His shadow sense was still being suppressed, but he cast it as wide as he could… which wasn't very wide, really.

'There has to be something.'

The Palace was obviously a structure created to channel a powerful sorcery. Sunny had been confident of that fact even before entering these walls, but after walking between them, he was sure. The Demon of Repose had built the Eternal City around the Palace. Every canal led to the lake surrounding it. The dome was highest above its spires.

[Cassie? What is your intuition telling you?]

Sunny used to have a supernatural intuition as well, but now that he was untethered from fate, it had become completely mundane. Cassie, meanwhile, had lost the ability to see the future… and yet she was still innately attuned to the great tapestry. She could sense the underlying connections between things, the intricate intersections of the Strings of Fate, the meaning hidden in them.

So, she was handy to have around. And since she practically lived in Sunny's head now, there was no need for her to be around, even.

Cassie did not answer immediately, then sent him a simple message:

[Down.]

Sunny sighed heavily.

"Ah, damnation. I knew you'd say that."

He looked at Nightwalker and summoned the helmet of the Jade Mantle.

"Wish me luck."

Nightwalker opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Sunny took a step forward and jumped into the pit.

He landed into the mold, feeling it squelch and part under his weight. A black cloud of spores rose into the air, obscuring everything in sight, and the repulsive flowers moved, trying to envelop him with their petals. Sharp thorns scraped against his armor, leaving shallow scratches on it.

"Argh…"

It was disgusting.

Breaking free of their hold, Sunny waded through the slithering mold, slowly making his way to the bottom of the pit. It was as if he was diving into an abhorrent mire.

He had hoped to find what he was looking for there, buried under the mold. But to his disappointment, the bottom of the pit where the Flesh of Kanakht had been sealed was no different from the rest of the Palace.

There was nothing there. No runes etched into the metal, no diamond strings, no streams of essence, no Strings plucked from the tapestry of fate and twisting onto each other… just a vast expanse of bent, corroded metal.

However…

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

There was something beneath the pit.

Out there, on the very edge of his shadow sense…

'What… the hell?'

He could sense shadows.

Thousands of them, motionless, still, silent.

They were shadows that belonged to living beings.

Chapter-2691: Red Lake

"Lord of Shadows… Sunny… how much longer do you need?!"

Jet's voice sounded strained.

The battle was still raging around her, and the Shadow Legion was slowly losing ground. The silent shades had already vanquished countless wraiths, but no matter how many enemies they destroyed, more and more revealed themselves from the mist.

What was worse, torrents of ethereal light sometimes escaped from the Cursed Wanderer's ghostly cutlass, infusing the mist with viridian glow. That meant that there were more wraiths still contained within the Soul of Kanakt — myriads of them, perhaps — and that the ranks of the undying army were constantly being replenished.

Jet herself was barely holding on.

Her battle with the captain of the Dutchman was furious, but at the same time strange. The great wraith was evading and dodging all of her attacks instead of facing them directly, while she did everything in her power to keep him at a distance. Despite the dreadful forces unleashed by their clash, neither had received a single wound yet.

That was because one strike of the viridian cutlass was all it would take to kill Jet. The Cursed Wanderer, meanwhile, was simply too powerful and diabolical to allow her scythe to touch him.

Jet had managed to build a solid defense through arduous effort. However, she could not mount an effective offense no matter how hard she tried… and she was trying truly hard, fighting both against the world itself and against her own limits.

On the surface, this state of things was beneficial to her. After all, she did not really need to kill the sinister apparition — her task was

merely to hold him back.

But in reality, the future looked more and more bleak with each passing moment. That was because battles of such intensity usually did not last this long. When a Transcendent poured so much of themselves into the battle, going above and beyond to match the power of a superior enemy, the outcome was more likely than not decided in a matter of moments.

Jet, however, had been locked in a furious melee with the Cursed Wanderer for… gods, she did not even know how long. The body and soul might have been unscathed, but her reserves of essence were slowly diminishing. Worse than that, she was growing tired.

The encroaching exhaustion was not of the physical kind, but rather a mental one. It took a lot to maintain her mind in a state of utmost focus, and by now, her intense concentration was showing signs of decay. She had not made a mistake yet, but at this rate, one was inevitable.

And one mistake was all it took to lose one's life in the world of the Nightmare Spell.

Which was why Jey was trying to find out how much longer she needed to hold.

This time, Sunny's voice did not resound from the shadows around her. Instead, Cassie whispered softly into her ear:

[He found a thread. Now, he just needs to pull on it… there's no telling how long that will take, though. Keep fighting for a little more!]

Jet gritted her teeth.

'That's what she said the last time!'

At that moment, the Cursed Wanderer finally managed to get past her defenses. The Mist Blade was just a split second late, but that allowed the great wraith to dodge it and lunged forward with chilling malice. Jet barely managed to position the shaft of her weapon in a way that prevented her enemy from impaling her with his sword.

He did not try, though.

Instead, the captain of the Dutchman took a swift step and reached for Jet with his hand.

The moment his palm touched the black leather of her armor, Jet screamed.

No… it was her body that opened her mouth, threw her head back, and let out a terrifying wail. She had no say in it.

In the next moment, it was as if an invisible wall slammed into her. Jet was tossed far back, collided with the silent shades, and fell to the ground.

She spat a mouthful of blood and weakly rose to her feet.

As she looked in the direction of the Cursed Wanderer, her expression darkened.

"What… the hell is this thing?"

Out there , on the other side of the Palace Lake…

Something massive and dreadful was rising in the mist.

Jet cursed quietly.

'I guess we've run out of luck, after all.'

The rivers of mangled flesh that had been converging from all across the Eternal City under the terrible weight of the Crushing finally fused together, forming a second lake — a viscous, red lake of blood and pulverized tissue.

The red lake was made up from the obliterated bodies of all the corrupted immortals. It swallowed an entire island, drowning the ruins. Its surface seethed and rippled, enduring the pressure of the Crushing…

And then, it began to swell.

An enormous lump grew in its middle, rising high into the air. From afar, it looked as if a red mountain was growing in the heart of the Eternal City.

Then, the mountain burst, and a colossal arm rose into the dark sky of this sunken hell.

Jet paled.

The bones were formed first, growing at a startling speed. Bloody marrow seeped down, escaping through swiftly disappearing seams. Then, tendons wrapped themselves around the bones, followed by colossal ropes of firm muscle.

Patches of skin grew atop the muscles… but then, something went wrong. Instead of covering the gargantuan arm entirely, the patches of skin blackened and shrank instead. The muscles contorted and spasmed in a revolting display of deformation, and the bones were twisted.

In the end, the colossal armed remained incomplete — or maybe simply different — towering above the ruins like a profane monument. Blood flowed down its immense length, and a rot was spreading through its tissue. The gargantuan arm resembled that of someone who had recently been flayed.

Then, it fell, allowing its palm to press against the ruins.

And another one was unleashed.

Together, they started to pull the body of the Flesh of Kanakht out of the red lake slowly.

Chapter-2692: Birth of a Titan

An enormous being slowly rose from the red lake, absorbing it. After the two colossal arms, a back with a bent spine showed itself next. Then, the top of a bloody skill, uneven shoulders, and an endlessly stretching torso. Finally, two towering legs were formed from the last remains of the lake, ending in stumped feet.

The being crawled across the ruins, pressed into them by the Crushing, then opened its maw and let out a chilling, deafening, tortured wail.

The twitching muscles on the creature's gigantic arms contracted once again, and it slowly pushed itself off the ground.

'Hell…'

In the next moment, Jet had no more time to study the titanic figure of the newly evolved Flesh of Kanakht. The captain of the Dutchman appeared from the mist, and a split second later, his cutlass was already flying through the air to cut off her head.

Jet felt like she was drowning in her own blood, but she still managed to evade, mumbling curses as she struggled to draw a breath.

She had to dedicate her entire focus to battling the great wraith once more…

And yet, the image of the newborn Titan remained in her mind, as if burned into it.

That thing looked like a colossal human… or rather, like a failed attempt to create a human. Its titanic body was horrid and misshapen and covered in patches of disgusting rot. The creature's skin was entirely missing, revealing contorting muscles that were constantly

seeping blood.

Its deformed skull was half-buried in slithering flesh, with a lower jaw that hung askew, barely attached to the rest of its face with rotting cartilage.

There was no intelligence in the deep dark pits of its missing eyes, just beastial and hungry lights.

Jet did not know whether the ghastly state of the Flesh of Kanakht was due to the Crushing or simply due to the rot of Corruption that permeated it. What she did know, however…

Was that the abhorrent thing was, without a doubt, a Titan.

As she fought the Cursed Wanderer, the Flesh of Kanakht slowly rose to its feet and straightened. Its size was so enormous that its head almost reached the roof of the invisible dome, the same size as the monumental edifice of the Palace.

'Damn it.'

Things were not looking good for them.

Out there across the lake, the Flesh of Kanakht let out another groan of agony and took an earth-shattering step forward. At the same time, the Cursed Wanderer landed another blow, sending Jet flying back.

She fell on the ground and rolled, feeling blood streaming down her face. Her vision turned blurry as the blood got into one of her eyes, burning it.

Not too far away, Naeve's harpoon shattered, leaving him unarmed.

The Dark Castle warily moved back as the wraith army advanced up the shore of the Palace Island.

The Shadow Legion was dwindling, and with every shade it lost, its eventual defeat seemed more and more cemented.

In the east, hidden from view by the soaring mass of the Palace, flashes of blinding white light were getting closer and closer to the

shore. Nephis was being pushed back, as well.

Jet winced and spat out blood, turning into a wraith and shifting away to avoid the fatal blow of the viridian cutlass.

Assuming her human form again, she raised the Mist Blade and pointed it at the Cursed Wanderer tiredly.

She wasn't feeling too well.

"Sunny, are you perhaps about done?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Cassie's voice resounded in her head once again:

[He needs a few more minutes.]

Jet sighed.

At this rate, they'll all be dead in a few more minutes.

The expedition and its reinforcements could face the Madness of Kanakht, the Flesh of Kanakht, or the Soul of Kanakht and its master… but not all of them at the same time.

If they wanted to last several minutes in this hell, one of their enemies had to die.

Looking at the Cursed Wanderer, Jet grinned and slowly lowered the Mist Blade.

As she did, the long war scythe changed form, turning into a black khopesh and robbing her of her reach advantage.

The mist turned frigidly cold, and a layer of ice formed on the shattered ground.

She grasped her sickle sword and lowered her stance a little, looking at her enemy with a dark intensity.

"Your Heart once told me to surrender and succumb, you know?"

Her grin widened a little.

"...Guess who succumbed in the end?"

As the Flesh of Kanakht took another step, approaching the Palace Lake, the Cursed Wanderer lunged forward.

Jet did, as well.

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In the depths of the Palace, Sunny had stepped through the shadows and moved past the floor of the vast circular pit. There was nothing but solid metal beneath it, stretching for about a hundred meters down. The reach of his suppressed shadow sense just barely allowed him to perceive a hollow space below — appearing under its ceiling, he cursed and prepared to plummet down.

There was another great hall hidden under the Seal Chamber, this one entirely circular in shape, with no doors leading into its vast expanse. Sunny expected to fall down, but to his surprise, he didn't.

In fact, he felt strangely weightless, drifting in the air…

Well, not exactly air. There was no air in the spherical hall to speak of, only the cold void of vacuum.

There was no gravity, either, so Sunny found himself in a strange state of falling endlessly while standing in place.

Summoning a tentacle out of shadows, he pulled himself to the roof of the hall — or its floor, depending on perspective — and manifested another shadow in a thin layer on the sole of his boot, instilling an adhesive quality to its composition.

Stepping onto the cold metal, he found himself sticking to it.

He looked around.

'How is this possible?'

All around him, there stood shadows.

They were the shadows of the immortals of the Eternal City.

Chapter-2693: Void Chamber

'Cold…'

The vacuous chamber was filled with nothing but stark light, shadows, and unbearable cold. Even Sunny, whose Supreme body was encased in the soulbound carapace of the Jade Mantle, could feel all warmth swiftly draining from his body.

At the same time…

He raised a hand. His palm was drowning in impenetrable darkness, while the back of his hand was shining with resplendent light. It had turned incandescent in the furious torrents of blinding radiance that poured between the shadows, on the verge of turning to ash.

Feeling his skin starting to blister beneath the sublime jade, Sunny grimaced and hid his hand in the shadows.

The vast spherical chamber was drowned in the radiance of a furious silver conflagration that burned in its center, suspended in the vacuum like a miniature star. In fact, maybe it was a star, just like the one imprisoned inside the Lighthouse — if so, this one was even smaller, so much so that Sunny could easily grasp it with his hands.

Of course, he would be incinerated long before reaching its radiant halo.

The vast emptiness of the chamber, the deep shadows, the brilliant flame burning in the center of the dark void like a beating heart…

It was like a miniature model of the Void and the Flame of Desire, almost.

The shadows of the immortals stood silently on the concave walls of the chamber, bathed in starlight… lonesome and lost. Most of them

belonged to humans, but some resembled beasts. Some were small, others were vast. Some, Sunny recognized, the rest of them were unfamiliar.

"Ha…"

He wanted to chuckle, but no sound escaped from his lips. After all, there was no air in the chamber, so nothing could carry his voice.

'So the old man was right, after all.'

Back at the Lighthouse, Nightwalker joked that the Demon of Repose drew inspiration from the curse Shadow God had placed upon Kanakht when designing the Eternal City. He turned out to be more right than any of them had imagined.

'This is her sorcery!'

Kanakht had been denied death, cursed to exist forever devoid of its final embrace — therefore, he did not have a shadow. Shadow God had taken it away.

So, this was how the Demon of Repose had created her immortals, as well. She had separated them from their shadows and then sealed the shadows in the heart of the Palace, preventing them from both returning to their owners and making the journey to the Shadow Realm.

That was why the prisoners of the Eternal City were immortal. They could not die because their deaths existed somewhere else.

Their deaths were in front of Sunny.

Naturally, he had no idea how the Demon of Repose had managed to sever living beings from their shadows without killing them. Neither did he know how she had been able to trap the orphaned shadows and overcome the pull of the Shadow Realm. Apart from that, Sunny could only guess why the buildings of the Eternal City endlessly restored themselves, as well.

What was sustaining the dome above the city? How was the annihilating heat of the imprisoned stars contained? Was it

harvested? And what means had the Demon of Repose used to realize her sorcery?

Sunny did not know any of these details.

However…

He did not need to know all the answers to make a mess of things. Destroying something was far easier than creating it, after all.

Especially because Sunny was uniquely suited to destroy this particular manifestation of divine sorcery.

Before that, though, he had to solve another problem.

A very serious problem.

'Ah, damn it all.'

The void chamber had been created to trap shadows.

And Sunny… was a shadow.

His shadow sense was flawlessly contained within the sphere of starlight and darkness, so he could not use Shadow Step. He could not travel to the waking world, either. He could not summon his Shadows or call upon his shades. In fact, he could not do anything to leave this empty place at all.

The void chamber had been created to cut off a part of the world from the universal laws of existence, after all. It was a place that barred passages to the Shadow Realm, so how was a mere Supreme supposed to escape it?

Sunny remained motionless for a short while, then walked across the metal surface of the chamber's wall by alternating the adhesive nature between the soles of his boots. Reaching the nearest shadow, he reached out to it.

Nothing happened when he touched it. Nothing happened when he commanded it to enter his soul and submit to him, either. However, when he cajoled and soothed it quietly, it hesitantly turned to him,

and then vanished without a trace.

A new shade was added to his legion.

That was promising enough… sadly, it was also not going to help him make the abominable immortals mortal once again fast enough — simply because there was a myriad of them in the void chamber, and he could not afford himself the luxury of convincing each one to submit individually.

Sunny walked among the orphaned shadows, looking around intently and absorbing them into his soul one after another. He was searching for something, but at the same time, he was thinking furiously about how to escape this place.

Eventually, Sunny stopped and lowered his head for a moment.

Then, he looked up with a dark smile.

'Alright, then.'

It was not a problem.

He figured out how to destroy the sorcery of the Demon of Repose, and the solution was pretty simple.

Since the orphaned shadows could not travel to the Shadow Realm…

He was going to bring the Shadow Realm to them.

As the light of the star burning in the center of the void chamber grew a little dimmer, Sunny raised a hand and summoned a particular Memory — of course, it was the Shadow Lantern.

'Thus spoke Weaver: they will open the gates…'

Grasping the Shadow Lantern in his hand, he opened its gate — the Gate of Shadow — drew his arm back… and then tossed the lantern toward the center of the chamber.

As soon as the Gate of Shadow opened, it was as if an invisible ripple spread through the vast, vacuous expanse. As if a cold wind blew

across the space that had no air.

A powerful pull descended upon the spherical chamber like a reverse Crushing. Of course, it only affected the shadows.

All of them turned to the delicate stone lantern simultaneously.

And then, the first of them was suddenly sucked into its open gate.

Chapter-2694: Call of Shadow

'Ah, crap…'

The Shadow Lantern was a Divine Memory, but it had always been subtle and understated. Usually, nothing flashy really happened when Sunny opened its gate — in fact, nothing happened at all. It was on him to either command or coax shadows into entering or call them back from the other side.

That was not what was transpiring at the moment, though.

As soon as the Gate of Shadow opened, a strange ripple spread through the void chamber, and the blinding radiance of the immolating star imprisoned in its center seemed to dim a little.

A powerful pull descended upon the shadows, drawing them toward the Shadow Lantern, which drifted away from Sunny in the weightlessness while spinning slowly.

Then, the Shadow Lantern suddenly froze in place, rooting itself into the world like a pillar of existence.

That was when the trouble started.

Everything seemed to stand still for a moment, and then the world quaked.

'What the…'

Sunny lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Raising his head, he looked at the distant Shadow Lantern with wide eyes.

Its small gate suddenly seemed vast and boundless like the Realm of Death itself, and the subtle pull it was exerting on the orphaned

shadows turned tyrannical and destructive.

More than that, it was growing more overwhelming with each moment.

Even Sunny was dragged into the air, only managing to hold himself in place by sinking the claws of his armored gauntlet into the metal floor.

All around him, the shadows of the immortals — hundreds of thousands of them — were slowly floating upward, pulled toward the boundless darkness of the Gate of Shadow.

It was like a dark, twisted version of the Rapture.

The laws of existence had been defied by the stubborn will of the Demon of Repose for untold eons, and now, the universe seemed to be zealously correcting itself, using the Shadow Lantern as its conduit. At least that was what it felt like to Sunny, who found himself caught in that violent process.

The furious white star was still burning in the heart of the void chamber, but now, there was an opposite singularity mirroring it — a flawlessly dark dot that was pulling everything toward itself. Shadows were pouring into the maw of the Shadow Lantern, and it seemed as if it was consuming the torrents of blinding stellar light with them.

With every shadow that passed through the Gate of Shadow, the radiant light of the imprisoned star was growing a little dimmer.

'N—not good.'

Sunny had thought that the Shadow Lantern was only exerting its pull on the shadows, but when the metal floor he was clinging to deformed and bent upward, he realized that he was wrong.

The entire place seemed to be slowly imploding.

…Outside the Palace, Cassie was standing on the walls of the Dark Castle. The dreadful battle between the allied forces of the Flame and Shadow Domains and the abominable union of the remnants of

Kanakht was raging all around her, but she was suddenly distracted by something else.

A drop of something cold had just landed on her head.

Raising a hand, Cassie brushed her fingers across her forehead and then brought them to her lips.

She tasted salt.

'Not blood… water?'

Raising her head as if wishing to gaze at the dark sky, she frowned.

She had to wait for one of her marks to do the same before she could see anything.

Drops of water were falling down on the vast ruins of the Eternal City, splashing against the rubble here and there, as if it was about to rain.

Of course, it was impossible for rain clouds to gather above the sunken city. Which could only mean one thing…

[Sunny. What... the hell did you do?]

It could only mean that the dome above the Eternal City was failing.

His voice resounded in her head a moment later:

[Well, about that… do you remember how I promised to unravel the sorcery of Repose? I think…]

Far away, in the heart of the Palace, Sunny's avatar rippled and turned into the four-armed devil, using all his claws and even his tail to hold onto the bending floor.

[I think I succeeded a little bit too hard!]

Sunny cursed under his breath and rushed across the imploding void chamber, looking around frenetically.

The brilliant star was slowly losing its radiance, while the black Gate

facing it seemed to be becoming darker and darker. It was like a spherical rift in the fabric of existence by now, surrounded by a flowing halo of light that disappeared into its vast darkness.

The void chamber was gradually growing smaller as it collapsed on itself.

'Where are you… where the hell are you?'

Sunny's gaze was jumping between the floating shadows. His other senses were searching, as well.

He had almost made a full circle around the imploding chamber by the time he finally found what he was looking for.

"Found you!'

Sunny wanted to shout, but there was no air in his lungs, and none for him to inhale anywhere around.

Hesitating for a moment, he let go of the deformed metal floor and launched himself into the air.

The Gate of Shadow pulled him toward it with dreadful force, but he had accounted for its draw already.

Flying across the maelstrom of stellar radiance and deep darkness, he reached a particular shadow and grabbed it.

Grabbing a shadow seemed like an impossible feat, but he willed his hand to do just that against all reason.

'Sorry, buddy. It's not time for you to find peace yet.'

The shadow he grabbed belonged to Nightwalker.

Twisting in the air, Sunny manifested a heavy kunai linked to a black chain in his hands and threw it back toward the caving floor. The kunai pierced deep into the weakened metal, and Sunny held to the chain for his dear life, relying on it to keep him from falling into the frightening black hole of the Gate of Shadow.

It was not time to leave the chamber yet.

'Hold on tight!'

He did not say those words aloud, and the shadow of Nightwalker would not have heard him, anyway.

But it seemed to grow still in his grasp..

The void chamber was slowly coming undone around them.

And around the chamber, the Palace was coming undone as well.

Chapter-2695: A Castle Built on Fog

A hideous laughter surrounded Nephis as she flew above the lake, illuminating its turbulent surface with her radiance. She had long assumed the form of the spirit of flame, wielding the Blessing to battle the Madness of Kanakht.

The ancient abomination was like a vast cloud of smoke and black dust that constantly changed and shifted, obscuring hundreds of twisted forms that seemed to be hidden in its dark depths. It had no claws, no fangs, and no hands to wield deadly weapons… however, it had no blood to be spilled, no heart to be pierced, and no head to be severed either.

Its shape was whatever madness consumed its enemies, and its power was whatever obsession made them weak.

The delusions given shape by the black dust wielded monstrous strength, capable of shattering mountains and tearing titans apart. What truly made the Madness of Kanakht terrifying, however, was the dreadful onslaught of insidious mental attacks it unleashed upon its victim.

Nephis could feel it as she invoked the name of Destruction and channeled her flames through the Blessing, summoning a furious firestorm — a malevolent presence invading her mind to infest it with a ghastly delirium.

Tormented by unbearable pain and dazed by the encroaching delusion, she coldly commanded the storm of flames to swallow the billowing expanse of black smoke.

The Madness of Kanakht laughed louder as it burned.

"More… burn me more, hurt me more, more… more!"

The vast cloud was incinerated, turning into a maelstrom of ash.

However, a moment later, the ash turned into smoke and black dust again, flowing forward like a tide to swallow her.

That was the worst of it. No matter how many times Nephis destroyed the Madness of Kanakht, it never seemed to die.

"Did you know, nephilim?"

An avalanche of devastating blows rained on her from all sides, forcing Nephis to dance in the air with her sword to defend herself.

"I've never met anyone as mad as you…"

Nephis cut the world with her Will, creating a rift in the boundless expanse of the Madness of Kanakht. She escaped its dark vastness and spun to deliver another strike.

A torrent of white flame spanning hundreds of meters fell from above, severing the black cloud in two. As soon as it touched the water, a deafening explosion rang, and everything became enveloped in steam.

"I draw power from madness, and your mind… ah, what a delicacy… what a feast…"

A moment later, the Madness of Kanakht was already mended and rushed forward to push her closer to the shore.

Nephis suppressed a groan, disoriented by the blinding pain of her Flaw. She was usually better at enduring it, but her mind was weakened by the constant assault of the vile delirium.

'Ah… I made a mistake.'

They had assumed that the delirium consuming her mind was strictly an attack meant to infect and debilitate her, but as it turned out, its main purpose was the opposite — it used her own mind to strengthen the Madness of Kanakht.

Nephis knew that she was not the most normal person. Her desires had always bordered on obsession, and her resolve had always been far more extreme than that of most people… all people, really, as far as she could tell. On top of that, she was Supreme, and all Supremes had to be a little mad to sustain the heavy weight of their unreasonable defiance.

So, if the Madness of Kanakht drew power from the derangement of its victims, it could gain quite a lot from her.

But Nephis had invoked the Name of Passion at the start of their battle, adding fuel to her already scathing desires. That was a way to empower her Will, but it had also inadvertently granted her enemy a far greater boon.

No wonder the fiend was so dreadfully strong.

"It is strange, though…"

The Madness of Kanakht descended upon her like a swarm of horrors, making the lake boil.

"There is so much of you missing. Your mind is a ruin already, through no effort of my own… who maimed you that way?"

Nephis measured the remaining distance to the Palace Island and frowned. How was she going to win this battle?

"What do you mean?"

Despite her torment and mental anguish, her voice remained even.

A sinister growl resounded from within the harrowing black cloud, washing over her like a wave:

"There are holes everywhere here. There are things missing. It is as if someone tore out half of your heart and replaced it with fog. How can a castle stand on fog? Ah… I've never seen such a strange creature before…"

Nephis hesitated for a split second.

Was he talking about the gaps left in her memory after the Tomb of Ariel? How did it know? And what did it know?

No... what had that thing said? It had seemed important...

That split second of hesitation was enough for a crushing blow to land on her radiant body, infecting the white flames with swirls of darkness.

She let out a scream, which drowned in the hideous laughter of the Madness of Kanakht.

"You and I are not that different, are we?"

Burning the infection out of herself, Nephis allowed the pain to cleanse her mind and unfolded her wings. The black dust around her melted, and the smoke was immolated. Air itself combusted, causing a destructive chain reaction and creating a bubble of cold vacuum.

Embraced by the deadly cold, Nephis raised the Blessing.

At this point, the wisest choice was to release the Name of Passion and rob her enemy of some of its power…

Her radiant figure blazed with merciless light as the air, the smoke, and the black dust rushed into the vacuum.

"You feed on madness?"

She smiled.

"Let's see how much you can eat, then…"

With that, she invoked the Names.

The Name of Hatred, the Name of Love, the Name of Despair, the Name of Courage, the Name of Wrath…

She called upon every passion and its every shade, drowning herself in unbearable, overwhelming emotions.

She let herself be consumed by madness.

…The Madness of Kanakht reeled.

Chapter-2696: Cog in the Machine

'What the hell? Why is it raining?'

A heavy downpour was descending on the ruins of the Eternal City. The drops of water seemed to move slowly as Jet staggered back, barely keeping her balance. Her face was smeared with blood, and her body was broken — and yet, she was still full of fight.

Now that the Mist Blade had assumed the form of a khopesh, she did not have the advantage of reach anymore. The Cursed Wanderer was still avoiding letting their blades cross, which held him back, but he had managed to land far more blows with his fists and feet now… as well as his elbows, knees, shoulders, and forehead.

The bastard really knew his hand-to-hand combat. It was as if he had spent thousands of years doing nothing but participating in fistfights.

'How come?'

Groaning quietly, Jet turned her torso to avoid the ghostly cutlass and counterattacked, trying to sink her sword into the ethereal body of the great wraith.

The rain made it harder to see.

In front of her, the Flesh of Kanakht had already reached the Palace Lake and stepped into it. The water barely reached its knees, and the enormous monstrosity waded through it, painting the lake red. Now that it was not slowed down by the Crushing anymore, it was advancing faster.

Around Jet, the Shadow Legion was being pushed back by the endless tide of wraiths. Worse than that, the army of silent shadows was also

shrinking — there were barely half of them left, by now.

Behind Jet, meanwhile…

Was she imagining things, or were the walls of the Palace slightly bending inward?

'What did he do?'

She could not be sure, but was pretty much convinced that the Lord of Shadows had done something crazy.

Not that it mattered to her, at the moment.

All that mattered was defeating the Soul of Kanakht and its master.

Jet forced out a smile as she dove under the whistling cutlass and tried to strike it with the Mist Blade from below. The Cursed Wanderer pulled his sword back with impossible speed, easily avoiding her trap, and slammed his palm into her abdomen.

"Argh…"

This time, something vital ruptured inside of her.

A torrent of blood flowed from her mouth, and Jet staggered back once again.

"Can you… can you give me a moment?"

She grinned through the pain.

The sinister apparition did not wait until she recovered, of course. He moved forward, intending to use her wounded state and finish her off…

If one thought about it, getting beaten that badly but somehow failing to die was quite an achievement.

Then again, she had been dead this whole time.

The Cursed Wanderer was making a mistake if he thought he could cut her down that easily, though.

He must have made a judgment about the power of his enemies based on what the silent shadows and the champions of the Shadow Legion could do… but Jet was neither.

Jet was a proud subject of the Human Domain.

So, just as her body was about to fail her, a soft glow suffused her skin, and a pleasant warmth permeated her body.

Embraced by Neph's purifying flames, Jet was healed and mended, restored to flawless health.

That was the blessing of the Human Domain and its brilliant, distant ruler. That was the power of the Immortal Flame, of the unquenchable Longing.

Of course, Neph's power was not absolute — she had to be paying attention to heal those who served her, and even her boundless supply of soul essence was not really inexhaustible.

However, Jet was one of the special few who always enjoyed her attention. That was her privilege as a former member of Changing Star's cohort and an irreplaceable cog in the great machine of humanity.

The Cursed Wanderer did not expect his enemy to suddenly be healed, so he fell into a momentary disadvantage. That was Jet's chance to end this fight, or at least lay the foundation of his defeat…

Sadly, she failed.

No matter how unexpected her recovery was, the great wraith was simply too powerful to be taken down. He easily avoided the Mist Blade, then unleashed a flurry of blows upon Jet. Deadly attacks rained on her from all sides, as if the bastard was in several places at the same time.

By the time severed drops of rain fell to the ground, Jet was bruised and battered once again, and white radiance enveloped her figure once more.

'Damn it…'

She threw a calculating gaze at the approaching colossus of mangled flesh.

Time was running out. In fact, there was almost no time left at all.

Which meant that she had to do something drastic.

The hilt of the black khopesh lay comfortably in her hand. This was the form of the Mist Blade that contained the soul of the Heart of Kanakht — the most powerful soul in her possession.

Because of that one soul, the Mist Blade was akin to a Supreme weapon of the Fourth Tier instead of being equal to Jet's own Rank and Class.

It also infused the Mist Blade with a special ability — all souls it bound did, but the Heart of Kanakht granted Jet an especially potent one.

It was the ability to stop the flow of time for everyone except herself for one heartbeat.

Needless to say, such an ability was incredibly deadly. However, it was not without drawbacks — the main being that it consumed pretty much all of her essence. For somebody else, that might have been merely inconvenient, but for Jet, it was fatally dangerous.

It meant that she had to be certain that she would be able to kill something in that single heartbeat. If she did, their death would nourish her arid soul. If not… she would die instead.

The risk was real and palpable.

The situation, however, was similarly desperate. And since Jet had known that it would become desperate, she transformed the Mist Blade into a khopesh in advance.

'Can I kill that fiend instantly?'

Jet wasn't sure.

But…

She was willing to find out.

Chapter-2697: Wraith Gambit

"Cassie! That thing is getting closer!"

Out there beyond the calamitous battle, the Flesh of Kanakht had already reached the middle of the lake. The Dream Gate had long vanished, and nothing stood between it and the shattered shore — the titanic horror gazed down, an eerie malice emanating from the dark, bleeding chasms of its empty eye sockets.

Its dislocated jaw swayed, putting strain on the elastic bands of muscle holding it in place.

'What the hell, damn, why is this thing so creepy!'

Jet retreated from the ghostly blade of the Cursed Wanderer, knowing that she could not escape it much longer. The dwindling formation of the Shadow Legion had been pushed back, retreating all the way to the walls of the Dark Castle — if she took another step back, their defeat would become inevitable.

[Don't worry about the Titan, Jet. You have enough on your plate!]

Jet smiled.

Cassie was undoubtedly right.

Torrential rain was falling onto the ruins of the Eternal City. The Ivory Island was frozen in the dark sky above the Palace, surrounded by cascading waterfalls. The Palace itself was slowly collapsing in on itself, its metal walls groaning as they bent inward.

Just then, another blinding white flash illuminated the world. This time, however, it did not dim, only growing brighter — it was as if a sun was rising from behind the crumbling Palace. The Eternal City was welcoming day for the first time since it sank to the bottom of

the Stormsea.

It seemed like Nephis was getting serious.

'It's now or never, I suppose.'

Jet looked at the Cursed Wanderer with cold, calculating malevolence.

Could she do it? Could she not?

The bound soul of the Heart of Kanakht granted her the ability to freeze time for a single heartbeat… at least that was how the Spell described it. A heartbeat was an unreliable measure of time, though. Different hearts beat at different rates depending on the circumstances, after all.

Jet's heart, for example, did not beat at all at times.

So, it would be more accurate to say that she would be able to move in the frozen time for a single moment. Could Jet slay the sinister apparition in a single moment? She did not know.

Worse than that, she did not know if the Cursed Wanderer would remain still when she froze time. He had usurped the power of the Soul of Kanakht, which meant that he had also usurped its Will. And those who wielded the Will could often resist the powers of those who did not.

As Jet looked at the Cursed Wanderer, her gaze kept being drawn to the ghostly cutlass glowing with an ethereal viridian glow in his hand.

The Soul of Kanakht.

Just then, it flashed with a cold halo of viridian light. The light drowned in the mist, and countless spectral figures suddenly became visible in it, ready to join the wraith army's assault.

'Ah, to hell with this.'

She lunged forward.

'What's the worst that can happen? I'll die?'

Jet could not help but smile at her own joke as she delivered a recklessly powerful downward cut with the Mist Blade. The great wraith avoided it easily by taking a step back.

A moment later, he would regain solid footing and use the opening created by her reckless attack to launch his own… probably delivering her a fatal blow.

But…

Jet reached into the Mist Blade and activated the ability granted to it by the Heart of Kanakht.

That fatal blow would have to come in two moments, no one.

The flow of time around her came to an abrupt halt.

The colossal, hideous figure of the Flesh of Kanakht stopped midstep. Drops of rain froze in the air. The mist ceased its swirling advance, suffused with ethereal light. The tide of eerie wraiths became a motionless canvas; the crumbling phalanx of black shades became a still painting drawn against its background with ink.

The Soul of Kanakht was slowly swelling with another flash of viridian light.

In the frozen time, only one thing moved — Jet.

She pulled her sword back up, aiming to pierce the Cursed Wanderer's chest.

But then, the sinister apparition suddenly moved, as well.

Slowly, he shifted his gaze and stared directly at Jet. His torso began to turn, and the hand holding the ghostly cutlass began to move forward.

'Bastard.'

Jet tried to calculate if she would be able to hit him, still.

Would one strike be enough?

The Cursed Wanderer was a Corrupted Devil, which meant that he had four soul cores. Souls usually collapsed long before all of their cores were destroyed… but would the same hold true for a wraith, a naked soul infused with malevolent will?

'Can I cut him four times in one heartbeat?'

Jet felt that she could, even if she was not entirely confident.

But her gaze…

Her gaze kept turning to the Soul of Kanakht.

In the end, she wasted her heartbeat to consider it silently, and then turned into a wraith herself.

Time resumed its flow.

The Flesh of Kanakht took a step. Drops of rain fell to the ground. The mist swirled as it washed over the furious violence of the battle between the Shadow Legion and the wraith army.

The ghostly cutlass shot toward Jet's heart.

However, it never pierced it.

Because as soon as time resumed its flow, the Mist Blade slashed across the Cursed Wanderer's wrist, severing it.

The sinister apparition's hand — as well as the Soul of Kanakht grasped in it — soared into the air.

Reaching forward, Jet grabbed the hilt of the ghostly cutlass.

As soon as it was in her grasp, she dashed back while holding both swords in her hands.

The Mist Blade in one, the Soul of Kanakht in the other.

Jet created some distance between herself and the Cursed Wanderer, then landed on the ground and looked at him with a dark smile.

"You did not like that, did you?"

The great wraith silently lunged forward.

He was a little bit late, though.

Jet looked down, at the hand that held the Soul of Kanakht.

Somehow, her hand looked even less substantial than usual. It was swiftly growing blurred, like a wisp of mist being dispelled by the wind…

And drawn into the ominous viridian cutlass.

Jet's smile dimmed a little.

"Crap."

In the next moment, she vanished in a flash of ethereal light.

The ghostly cutlass clattered to the broken ground.

Chapter-2698: Metal Coffin

In the void chamber of the Palace — what used to be the void chamber — Sunny let out a silent scream as the vast space around him was slowly turning into a narrow metal coffin.

It felt like the fabric of reality itself was coming undone around him as the shadows, the light, and the world itself were being drawn into the impenetrable black maw of the Gate of Shadow.

The star that used to burn in the center of the chamber was barely giving off any light by now, having turned into an incandescent sphere of liquid flame. With every moment, it was growing dimmer and dimmer.

The chamber itself, meanwhile, had long lost its spherical shape. Its walls bent inward in jagged mounds of folded metal, coming closer and closer together.

He was still clinging to a black chain, holding to it with all his Supreme strength. However, the smaller the void chamber grew, the closer he came to the halo of flowing light that surrounded the Shadow Lantern.

Sunny had no faith in the strength of the chain, either, even though he had manifested it himself.

'D—damnation…'

Throwing a tense look at the terrifying black rift of the Gate of Shadow, Sunny gritted his teeth.

In truth, he did not have to fear the Shadow Lantern. He could simply let go of the chain and fall into its Gate, traveling to the Shadow Realm with the rest of the shadows — in fact, that would even be beneficial to him.

It was going to take a bit of time for the Shadow Realm to destroy all these orphaned shadows, so in the meantime, he could draw more of them into his soul and establish a new contingent within the Shadow Legion.

But there were two reasons why Sunny was stubbornly refusing to let go.

One of them was the shadow of Nightwalker that he was holding in one of his four hands. He was still hellbent on bringing the legendary hero of the First Generation back from the dead, and the shadow was most likely Nightwalker's ticket home. So, Sunny refused to sacrifice him to the final mercy of the Shadow Realm.

The second reason was the subtle, but familiar sensations he started to feel once the walls of the void chamber began to cave.

It was the feeling of his blood responding to something that was hidden nearby.

Sunny could not be sure, but he was quite confident that the fragment of Weaver's lineage was somewhere here, in the crumbling chamber.

The problem was that he could see no obvious place where the fragment would be hidden. After all, the void chamber was simply a hollow sphere of metal with smooth walls… unless Weaver had placed a piece of his lineage into one of the shadows, there was seemingly nowhere here to hide it.

'Damn daemon! That damn daemon!'

Struggling against the irresistible pull of the Gate of Shadow, Sunny strained his muscles and grasped the black chain with two more of his found hands. Then, muttering silent curses, he arduously pulled him up its length.

The walls continued to collapse as he did.

'Hold there, buddy…'

The shadow of Nightwalker dangled from his fourth hand, seemingly

indifferent to what was happening around it. The Gate of Shadow was drawing it into the darkness nonetheless, so Sunny had to endure twice the attraction.

Sunny climbed the chain slowly, reached the deformed mess of metal that used to be smooth once, and sank all his claws into it.

The Shadowspawn form was perfect for hanging from the ceiling, so he managed to brace himself against it and hold on.

'Must hold…'

The void chamber used to be vast, but now, the formless chaos of its bent walls was drawing close to each other. The ancient metal seemed to be rippling and flowing like a current as it was drawn closer and closer to the Shadow Lantern, losing integrity in the process.

Sunny could already feel weaknesses in the metal — jagged rifts that led into the depths of the Palace, away from the collapsing chamber.

He was not ready to try to escape into one of those rifts yet.

…It was growing darker around him.

Soon enough, the entire Palace was quaking. Feeling its death throes and observing the deluge of rain outside its breaking walls, Sunny came to a curious conclusion.

He realized that the shadows imprisoned in the void chamber were not only how the Demon of Repose had made living beings immortal, but also the source of power that fueled the sorcery of the Eternal City.

The shadows fueled the star, somehow, and the star powered the sorcery of Repose.

Now that the shadows were escaping into the Realm of Death, though, the star was weakening. And as it weakened, so did the Eternal City…

All parts of it, including the protective dome that kept the Stormsea

at bay.

'That's… problematic.'

There was no telling what kind of dreadful devastation would befell the Eternal City once at leat a small part of its dome failed completely.

The furious star burning in its heart seemed on the verge of being extinguished by then. Its brilliant radiance dimmed so much that Sunny could actually look at it without being blinded.

Which he did, searching for something with fervent intensity.

'Don't tell me…'

And there, previously obscured by the blinding light and currents of incinerating stellar flame, Sunny saw a black dot that was not supposed to exist.

He stared at it for a few moments, stunned.

'Weaver, that bastard…'

Had the nebulous daemon hidden a part of the forbidden lineage in the heart of a damn star?!

Sunny knew that he was probably not supposed to be surprised, let alone appalled, but nevertheless, he was.

He was certain that the small object hovering in the very heart of the dying star was the fragment of Weaver's Lineage.

So… now, all he had to do was grab it without turning to ash and escape this place in one piece.

Chapter-2699: Event Horizon

'What to do, what to do…'

Clinging to the crumbling shell of the void chamber, Sunny peered at the vaguely noticeable item hidden in the heart of the dying star. The world was coming undone around him as the hungry maw of the Shadow Realm devoured it. The integrity of the imploding chamber had been compromised a long time ago, allowing air to rush in — because of that, he could hear once more.

What surrounded him was a deafening, penetrating, chilling hiss that was low and loud enough to sound like a furious roar. It was as if he heard the otherworldly voice of the Shadow Realm itself… and since the Shadow Realm was the corpse of the God of Death, Sunny wondered if that was what his voice had sounded like, as well.

The metal was groaning as it was torn and pulled apart.

What Sunny remembered while looking at the dying star of the Eternal City was not the Shadow Realm and its cold expanse, though. He remembered the conflagration of divine flames burning in the endless expanse of the Sky Below, and the pain he had suffered after being burned by them.

Was he going to burn once more today?

'Even if I am… let's do it, I guess.'

Gritting his teeth, he summoned a pair of black wings and then let go of the chain.

Immediately, the pull of the Gate of Shadow grasped him like an inescapable vice. Sunny found himself plummeting down — or maybe up — with terrible speed, barely able to control the direction of his fall... or ascension.

As he drew closer to the dying star, terrible heat washed over him.

Then, the heat became unbearable.

And then, it became impossible.

"Argh!"

Sunny regretted inhaling, because his lungs were instantly seared.

His wings caught fire first, black feathers igniting and turning to ash a moment later.

The Jade Mantle withstood the stellar radiance for a while, but then, incandescent cracks slowly spread across its surface.

The outward layers of the stonelike metal began to melt.

The shadow of Nightwalker grew smaller, shielded from the blinding light by the towering figure of the Shadowspawn.

…And it all hurt like hell, of course.

'Ah, damn it! I miss Antarctica!'

Sunny wanted to be buried in ice.

He wanted to go on a snowy expedition with Silent Stalker again.

Instead, nearing the furious white orb of the dying star, he gritted his teeth and spread his burning wings to fight the pull of the Gate of Shadow. His fall slowed, even if only for a moment.

But that moment was enough for Sunny to steel himself… and plunge his arm into the stellar flame.

The stonelike metal of the Jade Mantle finally melted.

His flesh melted, too.

However, even with his bones showing through the blackened flesh, Sunny still willed himself to grasp the fragment of Weaver's lineage hidden in the core of the dying star.

He tore it out and wasted a split second to look at what it was.

'A… scroll?'

It was an elegant scroll made of fine spider silk.

There was no time to study it yet, though. Sunny only needed to confirm that this was, indeed, the fragment of Weaver's lineage he had come here to find. And judging by how his blood responded to it, it was.

'I'll read it later.'

He would unfold the scroll when the Palace was not crumbling around him, when a Great Titan was not breathing down his neck, and when an army of wraiths was not besieging his Shadow Legion.

Even if a small, irrational, and exceedingly curious part of him kept screaming to read the scroll right now.

'That's all the initial goals of the expedition achieved.'

Sunny allowed himself to feel a brief moment of satisfaction.

He had come to the Eternal City to repair the Night Garden, recover Storm God's lineage, find the sixth piece of Weaver's lineage, and loot some treasure.

He had done all that. Now, only one goal remained — one he had discovered after arriving at his destination.

Get Nightwalker out of the Eternal City.

'About that…'

Sunny released his form, tuning into a vast and shapeless shadow. That made him more susceptible to the pull of the Gate of Shadow, but it also made him far greater, size-wise — so much so that he brushed against the collapsing walls of the void chamber.

Powerful tendrils of darkness pierced the jagged metal near one of the rifts in it and pulled him toward it. Sunny had to exert all of his

titanic strength, but that helped him avoid the event horizon of the Gate of Shadow and reach the distant wall.

There, he built the Onyx Serpent Shell around himself and the shadow of Nighwalker. Pushing his prodigious body into the rift in the wall of the void chamber, Sunny slithered away from its crumbling expanse and burrowed into the maze of tears created in the frame of the Palace like a worm burrowing into an apple.

The twisting, irregular tunnels moved and changed shape, closing and opening as he rushed through them. The molten surface of the Jade Mantle sent rivers of sparks flying as it scraped against the jagged edges of torn metal.

It only took him a dozen seconds to reach what had been the Seal Chamber of the collapsing Palace once — the great hall where the Flesh of Kanakht had been imprisoned.

It had changed a lot since Sunny left it.

The floor of the vast chamber caved, and the pit was strangely deformed. Nightwalker was hanging from its edge, trying to get away from the hills of mold below — black clouds of spores made the air hazy, and something that seemed like sunlight was pouring from somewhere, illuminating the nightmarish scene with pale light.

When Nightwalker saw the head of a giant Serpent rise from the darkness of the pit, his eyes widened.

"What the…"

He did not finish the sentence, though.

Because Sunny opened his maw without ever slowing down…

And swallowed him.

Chapter-2700: Starbeast

"Ah! What the hell?!"

"...Relax."

In the cavernous darkness of the giant snake's maw, Nightwalker rolled on something slick and hard, then jumped to his feet. Then, as a nonchalant voice resounded from the shadows around him, he lost his balance and fell again. That was because the dark cave he had found himself in was swaying.

That voice, though…

Why did it sound familiar?

"S—sunless?"

Slithering through the crumbling corridors of the Palace with astonishing speed, Sunny chuckled inwardly. Junctions and intersections flashed past him in a blur, and the walls that groaned and bent threatened to suffocate his Shell in a crushing embrace.

"Yeah, it's me. I just assumed a different form. Welcome to Sunny Express, Lord Nightwalker!"

Somewhere in his maw, Nightwalker carefully sat up and looked around with a resentful expression.

"You could have... ah, it's a Metamorphosis Ability. I get it."

Sunny was confused for a moment.

"People usually call it the Transformation Ability, actually. Or one's Transcendent form."

But how would Nightwalker know? He had been stuck in the Eternal

City for decades. There had been no Saints during his glory days, let alone colloquial terms to describe things that had to do with Transcendence. So, he would have had to come up with his own terminology.

Technically, the Onyx Serpent Shell was not Sunny's Transcendent Ability, but since Nightwalker had not posed his comment as a question, he was under no obligation to explain the difference.

Speaking of Transcendent Abilities, though…

As Sunny reached a seemingly bottomless stairwell and sent his serpentine body down its vertical expanse, he realized that he actually knew very little about Nightwalker's Aspect and Abilities. There had been little time to ask, and it was a sensitive subject anyway.

Asking another Awakened about their Flaw was considered exceedingly rude, while asking them about their Aspect could go either way. Colleagues had to share what they could with each other, of course, but it was always a little awkward. After all, everything you revealed could be used against you.

Then again… Cassie definitely knew what Nightwalker was capable of, already. So, Sunny could simply ask her.

But why would he when the man was right there?

"By the way, what is your own Transcendent form? Actually, what can your Aspect do?"

Nightwalker hesitated a little, prompting Sunny to add:

"It's just that we're about to fight a Great Titan, so I thought I'd be nice to know."

His youthful guide sighed..

"Well, I guess it's only fair. You showed me yours, I show you mine…"

Sunny almost spat the bastard out.

He did not like that phrasing at all!

Nightwalker chuckled.

"My Aspect is on the stranger side, though. It's a bit difficult to wrap your head around. My Dormant Ability is… a form of divination, I suppose. I have this feeling that tells me where to go to get to where I want to go. Or where to find what I am searching for. Like intuition."

Sunny nodded mentally. That made sense.

It was an understated, but unquestionably powerful Ability. In fact, it might just be the most potent Dormant Ability he had ever heard of, considering what kind of challenges Awakened usually faced in the Dream Realm and in the Nightmares.

Cassie possessed a similar kind of supernatural intuition, albeit hers was far less specific, and therefore not as powerful. There were benefits to her more vague but general sense, though, because while it did not clearly tell her where to go in any given situation, it did tell her where not to go from time to time. Nightwalker's Ability did not, which was a deadly flaw.

The man, meanwhile, continued:

"My Awakened Ability is, uh, how do I explain it? It's like a magical containment suit. Only there's no suit, it's just that my body becomes isolated from the environment. So, I can be impervious to all hazards for as long as I have essence — cold, heat, radiation, contaminants, pressure, and so on. At the same time, my body becomes self-sufficient, producing its own oxygen and nutrients. Something like that. Basically, I can go pretty much anywhere without dying… anywhere reasonable or only slightly unreasonable, at least."

'What the...'

Sunny vividly imagined Nightwalker just comfortably floating in space in comfortable pajamas, stargazing. For a moment, he felt a hint of envy.

That was basically any explorer's dream Ability.

'Lucky bastard.'

"What about your Ascended Ability?"

Nightwalker smiled.

"I can fold space."

If Sunny had eyelids at the moment, he would have blinked.

"Huh?"

Nightwalker shrugged.

"Simply put, I can fold it to make something long short, or unfold it to make something short long. It's a bit tricky and there's a lot of applications — an infinite amount, really — but with some practice, you can get amazing results. Taking one step and walking a hundred meters, for example. That was how we reached the center of the Palace so fast, by the way. I folded space to make each of our steps count for a dozen."

Sunny felt a strong desire to scowl.

'No, but how does it even work?'

And he had not even felt anything strange!

'That's a cheat Ability! Not fair!'

If anyone heard his thoughts at the moment, they would have probably commented that hypocrisy had a name…

Nightwalker, meanwhile, added with a hint of malice in his voice:

"Or, you know. I can fold the space that my enemy occupies. Or a body part of theirs. So, it's quite useful in combat, as well."

Sunny sighed.

"No kidding."

There was indeed an infinite number of ways that Ability could be

used, from traversal to fighting to even things like creating hidden storage spaces.

If Nightwalker had not been the founder of a Great Clan, he would have made for a peerless smuggler.

"So… you Transformation?"

Nightwalker scratched his nose.

"Well. I call it the Starbeast."

Sunny was a little confused.

"What is that?"

Nightwalker shrugged.

"Just like it sounds, a strange beast made of starlight. You know, light is both a particle and a wave. Similarly, my Transcendent form can be both tangible and intangible, or shift seamlessly between the two. It's a bit silly, but if there were animals grazing on cosmic radiation and gravity waves while drifting from star to star through the endless dark void… that is what I imagine they would look like."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

Eventually, he said in a disgruntled tone:

"...And you were surprised when I turned into a big snake?"

Nightwalker blinked a few times.

"Hey! It's not every day that I am swallowed by giant snakes, okay?!"

He paused for a moment and then raised three fingers in indignation.

"In fact, if I remember correctly, this is at best my third time!"

Which was three times too many, as far as he was concerned.

Chapter-2701: Pursuit of Mortality

The Palace seemed to be on the verge of collapsing by the time Sunny reached its bent, misshapen gates… actually, he wasn't even sure that the Palace could collapse. Normal buildings were built out of brick, wood, or stone — those in the waking world, meanwhile, were built from cement or metal frames covered by alloy plates. When damaged enough, they crumbled.

The Palace was simply cast from metal, though. There were no seams on its towering walls, and no distinction between its many spires. It was like a titanic organ built from countless hollow pipes — Sunny was not sure what music would be produced if the Palace ever sang, and had no idea what its destruction would look like.

It was not an idle interest, either. He needed to know in order not to get buried under the debris…

'Now is not the time to wonder, though.'

The giant serpent slithered out of the Palace like an onyx river and coiled briefly on the open space between its gates and the walls of the Dark Castle. Then, it vanished, leaving only Nightwalker, his shadow, and Sunny behind.

The shadow remained motionless, while Nightwalker rolled across the cracked stones with a stifled curse. Sunny, meanwhile, just stood there for a moment, looking at the silk scroll held in his blackened, charred hand.

The rain felt soothing on his skin.

A moment later, the scroll disappeared without a trace, transported onto the altar of the replica of the Nameless Temple standing upon

the dark waters of his lightless soul.

"What… what the hell is that?"

Nightwalker was sitting on the ground, staring at his shadow with a strange, mournful expression. It was as if he himself did not understand the bitter feeling of sorrow and longing that the shadow invoked in him, and was confused by that uninvited emotion.

Sunny sensed a deep, indescribable longing emanating from the shadow, as well.

The two clearly wanted to be mended and become whole again… to become one again. Even if neither of them had the capacity to realize that desire consciously.

'What a touching reunion.'

It seemed like a deeply meaningful scene — a man longing to reunite with his death. There was probably some kind of conclusion about human nature to be drawn from it, but Sunny was not really in the mood for philosophical ponderings.

His burned body hurt too damn much for that.

Lowering his hand, he answered with a shrug:

"That is your shadow."

Sunny approached Nightwalker and added in a subdued tone:

"Long story short, the Eternal City claimed you by separating you from your shadow. So if we attach it back to your soul, you'll be able to leave."

He scrutinized the shadow silently.

"Of course, you will also become mortal again."

Nightwalker looked around.

The mountainous edifice of the Palace was slowly collapsing in on

itself, the entire world seemed to be swallowed by blinding radiance and white flames in the east, a myriad of wraiths was besieging the dwindling formation of the Shadow Legion, a Great Titan was marching toward them across the lake…

And on top of that, the invisible dome holding the obliterating mass of the Stormsea back was on the verge of breaking.

Even if one tried really hard, it would be difficult to come up with a worse moment to suddenly become mortal.

Nightwalker grinned.

"Sounds great. Let's do it."

There was a profound sense of disbelief hidden behind his carefree tone. It seemed that he had never taken Sunny's promise to help him escape the Eternal City seriously… at least that was how Sunny interpreted a hint of hopelessness reflecting in Nightwalker's silver eyes.

He nodded slowly.

'Can I even do it?'

Well, that was a meaningless question. Sunny was a Supreme, so if he decided to do something, his Will would make it happen. His word was law in the most literal sense… as long as he could enforce that law upon the world.

Before getting to work, Sunny spent a few moments evaluating the situation on the battlefield.

The Shadow Legion was slowly being wiped out, but…

His expression changed subtly.

'Huh?'

[Cassie, where is Jet?]

None of his incarnations could sense her presence.

The response came shortly:

[She was swallowed by the Soul of Kanakht.]

Sunny's eyes widened.

[She was what?!]

Four of his incarnations were supporting the Shadow Legion and were therefore present on the battlefield, but he was not omniscient. The reach of his shadow sense was limited in the Eternal City, and most of the northern expanse of the Palace Island was enveloped by mist now.

On top of that, wraiths barely cast shadows. So Sunny was having trouble perceiving the ghostly soldiers and their leader, as well as Jet herself, when she assumed her Transcendent form.

Which was why he had lost track of her for a bit.

[What do you mean, she was swallowed by the Soul of Kanakht?!]

Cassie responded succinctly:

[I'm sure she'll be fine.]

It would have been more reassuring if she still had the ability to see the future.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'It's… Jet. It's Master Jet. She knows what she's doing.'

He was uneasy, but knew that he had to do his own part at the moment.

Especially because there was not much time left.

The dome of the Eternal City was coming undone, the damn ghost army was on a rampage, and the Flesh of Kanakht was drawing closer. The whole place was about to collapse.

All of these problems could be easily solved, though…

All Sunny and his companions had to do was run.

While preferable, nothing dictated that they had to slay the Flesh, the Soul, and the Madness of Kanakht. Now that Sunny had gotten what he wanted, they could simply leave the three eldritch abominations at the bottom of the Stormsea and escape.

The only thing standing in their way was the fate of Nightwalker.

As soon as Nightwalker and his shadow were reunited, Sunny would have far more options as far as the end of this expedition was concerned.

So, he looked at the youthful immortal and smiled.

"Hey… stay still."

Nightwalker raised an eyebrow.

"Okay? But, uh… why did you say it so ominously?"

Sunny kneeled near him, outstretched a hand, and summoned a Memory.

Moments later, Weaver's Needle fell into his grasp.

"Because I am going to sew you and your shadow back together. Oh… it might hurt, but don't worry."

He smiled pleasantly.

"You won't die."

With that, four inky-black hands manifested at his sides.

The four hands wove a thread out of shadow essence. The charred arm hung limply, while the second of the original hands held the needle.

Sunny took a deep breath.

And got to work.

Chapter-2702: Shadow Seamster

How had the Demon of Repose separated living beings from their shadows?

Sunny had no idea.

That shouldn't have been possible. She was not Shadow God, after all. In all Sunny's years, he had only witnessed something similar once: he had met the lost shadows that belonged to the companions of the First Lord of the Bright Castle at the boundary of the Underworld.

Sunny still did not know what exactly had happened to them. All he knew was that it had something to do with either Nothing or Nothing Creatures… come to think about it, there were wisps of nothingness drifting in the central hall of the Palace, as well.

Maybe that had something to do with it.

In any case, Sunny was uniquely suited to resolve the fate of orphaned shadows — both back then and now.

The shadows severed by the Demon of Repose were being drawn into the Shadow Realm at the moment. There, they would return to the natural cycle and be reduced to pure essence… which meant that the immortals of the Eternal City would become mortal again.

Actually, no. That was not right. They would not become mortal — they would die.

All the bodies that comprised the Flesh of Kanakht would perish. Sunny doubted that it would bring the Great Titan down, though. He did not believe that it cared whether its flesh was dead or alive, after all — it never had. The immortals made for perfect hosts for the malevolent parasite not because they were alive, but because they were undying.

Similarly, the Flesh of Kanakht itself was not going to die. That was because it had never died in the Eternal City, and its shadow was not in the void chamber as a result. The sorcery of the Demon of Repose was not holding it back… or rather, the sorcery that had held it back was long gone.

The barrier built by Daeron did contain it, though. For now, at least — it had been created to prevent a Great Terror from being unleashed upon the world, not a Great Titan.

In any case, Sunny and his companions would still have to fight the Flesh of Kanakht. With the sorcery of the Eternal City failing, however, its body would not be healed in an instant, and it would not be raised from the dead, either. So, they at least stood a chance.

That was the extent of his current concerns about the shadows drawn into the Shadow Lantern. One shadow remained, though…

The shadow of Nightwalker.

Unlike the rest that had to be returned into the embrace of death, that one had to be returned to its original owner instead. But since Sunny did not know what sorcery the Demon of Repose had used to sever it, there was no clear way to reattach it.

It was not like he had no relevant experience, though.

Surprisingly enough, Sunny had done something similar to what he wanted to achieve once. It was during the creation of the Blessing. Back then, he had sewn the shadow of the sword to the shadow of its wielder in order to connect its physical vessel to its spellweave.

It had not been easy, considering that he had to bend the world to his will to succeed. However, Sunny had indeed succeeded. Mostly because his Will had already been tyrannical enough, but also because he used Weaver's Needle and possessed authority over shadows.

After all, he was the Lord of Shadows.

Sunny had been a Transcendent Terror back then. He was a Supreme Titan now, and his Will was therefore far more dreadful.

So, if he wanted to sew Nightwalker's shadow back to its owner, no one could tell him that it was impossible. It was in his purview to decide what was possible and what was not, to begin with.

'I doubt it will be effortless, though…'

Laying the shadow of Nightwalker over the inanimate shadow that followed him around, Sunny peered into his soul and saw the splendid radiance of his starlike core.

Then, he reached forward and pierced Nightwalker's soul with his needle.

Nightwalker gritted his teeth, then let out a curse so dirty and inventive that Sunny almost blushed.

'What the hell. I did not know those words went together?'

"Settle down. It's just the first stitch. There are far more coming."

Nightwalker glared at him silently.

"Then get on with it!"

Smiling faintly, Sunny did.

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While one of his avatars was busy reattaching an orphaned shadow to its other half, four incarnations of Sunny were supporting the Shadow Legion in its desperate battle against the wraith army.

'To be honest, I am a bit… disappointed.'

Sunny had hoped that his legion would be able to repel the myriad of souls unleashed by the Dutchman. However, the actual outcome was somewhat expected.

After all, the captain of the Dutchman had spent thousands of years accumulating his forces. Sunny, meanwhile, was not even thirty yet.

'What will I become in a few thousand years, I wonder? How vast will

my legion be?'

Well, by then, he would not be the Sovereign of Death anymore. He would simply be Death. So, his legion would presumably consist of everyone who had ever died.

If he were to survive at all, of course.

'The situation is troubling.'

The number of shades was dwindling. His Shadows were wounded. The formation of the Shadow Legion was pressed against the walls of the Dark Castle, barely wide enough to defend it.

Nephis was still fighting the Madness of Kanakht, but Jet was nowhere to be seen, which meant the Cursed Wanderer was free to wreak havoc.

However… Sunny had just a plan in mind to turn the situation around.

It required him to make a little sacrifice, but promised a bountiful harvest in return.

'No sense in wasting time, then.'

A moment later, three of his incarnations abandoned the Shadow Legion, leaving only the one augmenting the Puppeteer behind. Robbed of their support and of the dire boon granted by the Curse, the silent shades suffered. More of them were being killed now under the onslaught of wraiths, and fewer enemies were vanquished. The inevitable defeat of the Shadow Legion was brought closer.

But that was, hopefully, alright.

The three incarnations manifested black wings and soared into the air.

They were flying toward the Palace, whose walls were torn and split open by then.

A few moments later, the incarnations dove into one of the rifts and

disappeared from view.

Chapter-2703: Last Hurdle

The Shadow Legion had been pushed against the walls of the Dark Castle and diminished to barely a third of its size. The mist that threatened to swallow it had been held back by a monstrous blizzard for a while, but now that the shadow of the Winter Beast was vanquished, it enveloped the world; the Defiled Seeker had fallen, and even the elusive Ember Queen was littered with grievous wounds.

Neither the shades nor the wraiths left bodies behind, and the Palace Island kept repairing itself no matter how terribly it was shattered and broken, but the battle that was taking place on its shores had been truly cataclysmic... more so than any battle Sunny had ever participated in.

And he was losing that battle.

His legion had been at a disadvantage to begin with, and that disadvantage continued to grow exponentially as more and more shades were vanquished. Things took a truly drastic turn only when he pulled back three of his incarnations, though.

Devoid of their support, the formation of the Shadow Legion began to melt at a dire speed.

But even that was not the most pressing issue.

'That bastard…'

The most pressing issue was the Cursed Wanderer and the eerie sword he wielded — the Great Tyrant, Soul of Kanakht.

Before the Flesh of Kanakht arrived, that was.

Now that Jet was gone, there was no one left to stand in his way,

which meant that he could utterly decimate the formation of the Shadow Legion. Worse still, the sinister apparition did not simply vanquish the shades — he could truly destroy them.

Sunny could not allow that to happen.

The problem was that he did not have a lot of options left. The Shadow Legion was already barely holding on — or failing to hold on, rather — and very few of his warriors could slow down the Cursed Wanderer, let alone contend against him. Sunny could command Saint to bar his path, for example, but that would only cause the section of the formation she was supporting to collapse.

'What to do?'

Did he have to face the great wraith personally?

Only two of his incarnations were outside the Palace. One was busy attaching Nightwalker to his wayward shadow, while the other was augmenting the Puppeteer. Sunny could potentially abandon the colossal moth and manifest himself onto the battlefield, but that would mean surrendering precise control of the Shadow Legion. The result would be just as disastrous as doing nothing.

'I just need to buy time.'

He considered his options feverishly, trying to determine the optimal solution, then swiftly settled on the best one.

Down on the battlefield, the Cursed Wanderer picked up the ghostly cutlass from the ground and straightened slowly. He cast an aloof gaze at the crumbling formation of the Shadow Legion, and then headed toward it with unhurried steps.

An Obsidian Wasp dove at him through the pouring rain, and he casually bisected it with an effortless slash.

His gaze climbed higher, finally settling on the dark figure of the gargantuan moth perched atop the highest tower of the magnificent black castle. The Cursed Wanderer regarded it for a moment, and then his cold sea-colored eyes ignited with a chilling malice.

The sinister apparition continued forward, casually slaughtering the shades that tried to get in his way.

Until a lightning-fast blade struck from the veil of rain, sudden and entirely unseen.

The Cursed Wanderer only reacted at the very last moment, swiftly raising his cutlass to block it. The impact actually pushed him several meters back, and the ground behind him was shattered in a long and jagged line.

He remained motionless for a moment, then righted his posture and looked ahead. There, hidden in the rain and swirling mist, a dark figure stood, staring back at him with a ruthless intensity.

Her ebony body was encased in a suit of light armor, and her face was obscured by a veil. She wielded a short sword in one of her hands, and as the sinister apparition watched, she unsheathed another. Both blades slowly swelled with a blinding glow, illuminating the mist and outlining her slender figure.

She was the shadow of Orphne of the Nine, Slayer.

Sunny had commanded her to abandon the walls of the Dark Castle and descend onto the battlefield. Who was better suited to confront the ghost of a fallen member of the Nine, after all?

The ghostly face of the Cursed Wanderer remained motionless, but something changed in the depths of his sea-colored eyes. A hint of recognition appeared in them, painted by an inexplicable emotion.

His lips, which had remained sealed for thousands of years, moved slowly, as if straining to whisper a forgotten name.

But in the end, no sound came from them.

Indifferent to the subtle movement, Slayer lunged forward with dreadful speed. A trail of shattered raindrops was left in her wake, and the mist flowed in a turbulent stream around her.

The Cursed Wanderer shifted and met her attack with indomitable strength, causing a flash of light to drown everything around. The

shining swords and the ghostly cutlass danced a deadly dance, guided by malevolent will and boundless killing intent. The litany of ringing steel echoed in the mist, fusing into a chilling melody.

The Shadow and the wraith exchanged a hundred blows in the blink of an eye, shattering the ground around them completely.

Slayer did not manage to gain the upper hand… in fact, she was pushed back a few steps and forced into a defensive stance.

However, she had not been defeated, either.

For a few moments, at least, the perilous clash seemed to hang in fragile balance.

Which meant that the Cursed Wanderer was temporarily contained and held back from reaching the formation of the Shadow Legion.

And that was all Sunny needed.

Because by the time Slayer could not hold the sinister apparition back anymore, he would have had enough time to turn this entire battle upside down.

Chapter-2704: Turning the Tide

Slayer engaged the Cursed Wanderer in a deadly duel, which bought the Shadow Legion some time…

But, sadly, not a lot of time.

Even if she continued to hold the sinister apparition back, his army of wraiths was still assaulting the weakening formation of the silent shades. Saint, Fiend, and Serpent did their best to repel the enemy, but even their great strength was not enough to turn the tide of the battle.

Soon enough, the formation was going to break. The wraiths were going to wash over scattered shades, obliterating them. Then, they would assault the walls of the Dark Castle, bring them down, and slaughter its defenders. Lastly, Sunny would be left to face the horrors of the Eternal City alone, having lost both his shades and his Shadows.

He would probably be able to save Naeve, but the incarnation sewing Nightwalker and his shadow together would be interrupted, dooming the legendary founder of the House of Night.

That was unless the Flesh of Kanakht reached the Palace Island first and fused with the Soul of Kanakht, dooming all of them.

The ghastly mountain of bleeding flesh was already looming close, wading through the boiling lake with deceptively slow steps. Now that it was closer, its titanic size felt especially daunting… the Flesh of Kanakht was not exactly on the same level as Condemnation, but close to it, standing as tall as the Palace.

Actually, now that the Palace was collapsing, it was taller than it.

The abhorrent Titan could easily reach the roof of the failing dome

with its hand… which meant that it could reach the Ivory Island, as well. It could also rip off the colossal wings of the Puppeteer or crush the entirety of the Dark Castle under one foot.

'How are we even supposed to fight that thing?'

Sunny knew that he would manage, somehow, if push came to shove. But he was not looking forward to that particular battle.

He would have to survive the Dutchman and the wraith horde first to get the chance to survive against the Flesh of Kanakht, though.

East of the Palace Island, Nephis and the Madness of Kanakht were still locked in a fierce battle. Sunny did not know what was going on there, but judging by the blinding radiance that enveloped the eastern sky, she was going all out.

The situation seemed hopeless…

But, luckily, it was not.

Continuing to stitch Nightwalker and his shadow together, Sunny smiled darkly.

'Good job, Slayer.'

He had bought himself enough time.

Out there on the shattered battlefield in front of the Dark Castle, the formation of the Shadow Legion shifted slightly.

The towering gates of the castle opened.

And then, suddenly, rows of new shades marched out of its maw.

Hundreds of them at first, then thousands. Most belonged to humans, but some belonged to magnificent beasts.

And all of them were exceedingly powerful.

Sunny's smile widened.

Well, of course they were. After all, they were the shadows of the

immortals of the Eternal City.

At the same time as his burned incarnation had begun to stitch the orphaned shadow to Nightwalker, three others entered the collapsing Palace. In an ironic twist of fate — or lack thereof — he rushed back to the Shadow Lantern immediately after escaping it.

His avatars swiftly reached the void chamber — what had been the void chamber, rather. It did not exist anymore, having fused with the great hall above it in a mess of darkness and torn metal. The dying star was barely an ember, and the black rift of the Gate of Shadows seemed to have grown hungrily in size.

The three incarnations dove into its impenetrable darkness without ever slowing down.

'Argh!'

Entering the Shadow Realm, Sunny was immediately blinded. The vast expanse of black dunes was usually shrouded in darkness, illuminated only by the distant radiance of the essence storms. However, at the moment, he was surrounded by turbulent currents of essence on all sides, bathed in brilliant light.

It seemed that an essence storm was being born at that precise moment, in front of his eyes, all around him.

Countless shadows were moving slowly in the blinding radiance, slowly dissolving into billowing torrents of essence. They were the shadows he had liberated from the prison built by the Demon of Repose, delivered to the Realm of Death after eons of captivity.

The Shadow Realm was rending the shadows swiftly, as if time was catching up to them. He was not going to be able to recruit them all… but with three avatars acting as his heralds, he would be able to recruit many.

Enough to turn the tide of the battle, at least.

And that was what he did.

Now, thousands of immensely powerful shades emerged from the

gates of the Dark Castle like a black torrent. They flowed around the formation of the Shadow Legion and descended upon the wraiths from the flanks, crashing into them like an obliterating wave.

Compared to the myriad of ghostly soldiers, there were not that many new shades joining the battle. But each of them had been cast by an immortal dweller of the Eternal City — they were all tremendously strong, vastly increasing the power of the diminished Shadow Legion.

Enough so to break the balance of the battle entirely.

The Shadow Legion had been losing before. But now, it suddenly had the advantage, pushing the ethereal warriors back. Countless wraiths were slaughtered in an instant, and more were being destroyed every moment.

Even the mist seemed to reel back, repelled by the fury of the calamitous clash.

Somewhere above, there was the sound of thunder. A hexagonal section of the invisible dome failed, and a pillar of black water of the same shape crashed down, instantly turning the ruins below into dust.

The dust did not move anymore, having lost its ability to turn back into magnificent buildings.

The Cursed Wanderer halted for a moment, watching as his army was being destroyed.

Then, he lunged forward, broke through Slayer's defense with a reckless attack, and endured the sharp bite of her blades. He was severely wounded, but managed to push Slayer back with that sacrifice — she evaded the ghostly cutlass, but failed to evade his empty hand.

The great wraith's hand pierced her abdomen, dealing her a deep wound, and threw her to the ground dozens of meters away.

The Cursed Wanderer did not pursue his wounded opponent, though.

He did not rush to join his melting army, either.

Instead, the sinister apparition turned around and rushed toward the approaching ghastly mass of the Flesh of Kanakht.

Sunny flinched.

'Curses!'

Chapter-2705: Soul of Kanakht

'Damnation!'

Behind Sunny, the Palace collapsed inward with a deafening scream of tearing metal. Its proud spires and towering walls crumpled as if they were made from paper, and its foundation actually detached from the ground in a mess of jagged edges, slowly rising into the air.

The entire colossal structure seemed to levitate. In reality, of course, it wasn't taking flight — it was simply being drawn to a central point. The expanse of the palace above the void chamber was being drawn downward, while everything below it was being drawn upward. The unimaginable mass of metal was contracting under inconceivable pressure, deforming and losing shape as it slowly grew smaller.

The invisible dome protecting the Eternal City was in the initial stages of collapsing, as well, and the Flesh of Kanakht was just a few steps away from reaching the shore of the Palace Island.

But that was not what had Sunny's attention at the moment.

Instead, it was the Cursed Wanderer, who had chosen to abandon his wraith army and dash toward the lumbering Great Titan instead of continuing his assault.

'That damn wretch!'

Belatedly, Sunny realized that just like he and his companions had already accomplished most of their goals, the sinister apparition had already accomplished his. Since they could simply retreat, so could he…. it was just that Nightmare Creatures were not usually ones to resist the scent of human souls, so Sunny had not considered this turn of events seriously.

But the Cursed Wanderer had already gotten his main prize — the

remains of the Heart of Kanakht, which were preserved in Jet. Now that Jet was in his grasp, obliterating the Shadow Legion was merely a bonus.

And it seemed like the great wraith chose to continue expanding his collection of the fragments of Kanakht first, then slaughter the humans second.

'Curse him!'

It was a reasonable choice… the problem was that Sunny could hardly pursue the apparition at the moment.

Slayer was wounded and far behind the Cursed Wanderer, so even if she ignored her wounds and pursued, she would not be able to catch up with him in time. Saint was even further away, while Serpent and Fiend were entangled with a vast swarm of wraiths.

Neither Naeve nor the shadow of Daeron were fast enough, and even the Puppeteer was not going to reach the sinister apparition in time. Sunny could only go himself, but if he did, the Shadow Legion would lose its hard-won advantage and fall into a dire state again.

The Flesh of Kanakht was like a mountain now, having drawn close enough for its titanic body to be beheld in all its abhorrent glory. The boiling waters of the lake barely reached its knees, and as it took the next step, the entire Palace Island quaked.

By now, it could touch the shore by simply leaning down and outstretching a hand.

And that was where the Cursed Wanderer was rushing, to the span of the lake shore directly in front of the Great Titan. He was raising his ethereal cutlass, as if prepared to sink it into the Titan's flesh. His cold, sea-colored eyes were glowing with an ominous light.

Sunny attempted to manifest shadows to bar the sinister apparition's path, but his enemy was too far, mere moments away from reaching the shore.

'Crap.'

Sunny steeled himself for things going from bad to worse…

But then, something strange happened.

The ethereal glow of the viridian cutlass suddenly grew dimmer.

And then, it grew dimmer still.

'Come to think of it…'

Sunny suddenly realized that it had not emanated a wave of viridian radiance, and therefore had not summoned a new swarm of wraiths, in a while.

'Huh?'

The Cursed Wanderer had felt that something was wrong, as well. Without ever slowing down, he spun and threw the ghostly cutlass, which cut through the raging currents of rain like a flash of viridian lightning. The spinning blade soared high, aimed at the heart of the Flesh of Kanakht.

Sunny did not know what would have happened if the two parts of Kanakht collided... and he never got the chance to find out.

Because the ethereal cutlass never reached the Titan.

Almost immediately after it left its master's hand, a net of thin cracks spread across its viridian blade.

And then, to Sunny's shock — and the Cursed Wanderer's shock, as well…

It shattered.

Even the Flesh of Kanakht seemed stunned by the sudden destruction, halting for a moment as it reached the shallows of the lake.

However, there was no mistake. The ghostly cutlass wielded by the sinister apparition broke apart as it flew, its shards falling down as they slowly dissolved into ethereal light.

The Soul of Kanakht…

Had been destroyed.

Sunny perceived its destruction viscerally, sensing its faint, but harrowing shadow dissipate without a trace.

'H—how?'

He struggled to believe his own senses.

The mist swirled as it swallowed the last glimmers of the eldritch horror. Then...

The mist coalesced into a familiar form.

Jet stood there, in front of the Cursed Wanderer, wielding a fearsome scythe. She was still in her wraith form, looking chillingly similar to Undying Slaughter, by whose hand Sunny had died gruesomely countless times.

There was something… different about her.

Jet had not grown taller, but her presence had become far more overwhelming, making it seem like she did. It was as if she towered above the Cursed Wanderer now, looking down at him with her icy blue eyes.

The Cursed Wanderer looked at her, as well.

Then, the dreadful scythe fell down, passing through his ghostly body from shoulder to hip.

He remained motionless for a few moments, frozen in place.

But a moment later, a gust of chilling wind blew and dispelled him like mist.

…Just like that, the Cursed Wanderer was destroyed, as well.

He was vanquished in the very heart of the Eternal City, which he had searched for for thousands of years, slain by a far more dreadful

wraith.

Jet lowered her scythe and looked up, as if wanting to inhale deeply.

At that moment, Cassie's voice resounded in Sunny's head.

[See... I told you she'll be fine.]

Chapter-2706: Fox in the Henhouse

[You have slain a Great Tyrant, Soul of Kanakht.]

[You have slain a Corrupted Devil, Aletes of the Nine.]

Jet looked up at the dark sky of the Eternal City.

She should have felt ecstatic, but instead, the thought that came to mind was…

'D—damn.'

She had not been away for long, but the sky above her was crumbling.

The torrential rain had turned into an apocalyptic downpour, and here and there, colossal hexagonal pillars towered above the ruined city. From afar, it seemed as if they were supporting the invisible dome of the sky, but it did not take Jet more than a moment to realize what they really were.

The vast surface of the invisible dome turned out to be composed of countless hexagons, and as some of them faded out of existence, the cold waters of the Stormsea rushed down under devastating pressure. The giant pillars were not supporting the dome — they were water falling through the breaches in the dome, still contained in their shape.

On top of that, the Palace was nowhere to be seen. Instead of it, a gargantuan mass of bent metal was floating in the air, groaning as it was being bent even further.

'By the dead gods. I only stepped out for a moment…'

On the positive side, the Shadow Legion seemed to have been pushing the wraiths back. And now that both the Tyrant controlling them and the Devil controlling the Tyrant were gone, those wraiths were barely a threat. They would be wiped out before too long.

'Right.'

Jet finally remembered what she had done.

She had killed them.

The Soul of Kanakht, the Cursed Wanderer. The horror of the seas, Dutchman, and its fearsome captain were both gone, slain by her hand like many abominations before them. Jet had killed countless Nightmare Creatures throughout the years, but still…

This was her crowning achievement. A Saint killing a Great Tyrant was not exactly a common occurrence — in fact, it was something that was not really supposed to happen.

And yet, Jet had done it.

In the end, it had all come down to the decision she made after activating the special ability granted to the Mist Blade by the soul of the Heart of Kanakht.

Jet had wanted to attempt killing the Cursed Wanderer, but she was not sure if she would be able to. It was a gamble, and a dangerous one at that.

So, in the end, she went with a different gamble.

Instead of trying to slay the master of the Soul of Kanakht, she chose to be swallowed by it.

It was not an entirely reckless decision. Jet had been studying the Dutchman and its wraiths for a while by then. She had especially noted that the ghostly cutlass kept emanating torrents of ethereal light, summoning more spectral warriors onto the battlefield… which meant that its hold was not empty yet.

The Soul of Kanakht was a hungry beast that had devoured countless

souls throughout the ages.

However…

Jet had quite an appetite herself.

She wanted to kill the Cursed Wanderer, but that was not her task. Her task was to hold him back and buy her allies enough time to accomplish their goals. The Soul of Kanakht was his source of power, so if she could destroy or weaken it, that would achieve the same result.

Plus, she had just the needed constitution to do that, being a wraith and all.

So instead of trying to kill the Cursed Wanderer in the single heartbeat granted to her by the Heart of Kanakht, Jet severed his hand and took hold of the ghostly cutlass instead.

She knew that it would consume her. In fact, the very purpose of stealing the Soul of Kanakht was to be consumed by it. Still, when she felt herself being drawn into the viridian blade, she could not help but feel unnerved and cursed quietly.

In the next moment, she was gone.

Out there in the belly of the Soul of Kanakht, the world was different.

There was no world there, actually, to begin with.

There was no space, no time, no life, no death.

Just a vague expanse of viridian glow that enveloped her like a mire…

And the presence of countless souls that the Tyrant had consumed, just like her.

But there was one crucial difference between Jet and those subjugated souls.

They had been killed before becoming thralls of the Soul of Kanakht.

Jet, however, had been dead to begin with… she entered captivity as a malevolent wraith, not as a hapless soul stripped of its flesh.

And that allowed Jet a measure of independence, at least for a brief moment.

She was on the verge of dying by then, her soul almost entirely drained of essence. The tyrannical Will of the Soul of Kanakht descended upon her, striving to suffocate her sense of self and make her a mindless, obedient thrall. It might have succeeded, as well — it would have, probably, given a chance.

But Jet did not give the Soul of Kanakht an opportunity to conquer her.

Instead, she used that brief moment to raise the Mist Blade and focused her killing intent into a razor-sharp scythe.

One slash of that scythe was enough to harvest every enthralled soul within the Great Tyrant.

After all, there was no space and no time there. That meant that all of the captured souls occupied the same space, and unleashing ten thousand strikes took the same amount of time as striking once.

So, like a fox in the henhouse, Soul Reaper Jet slaughtered every single phantom contained within the Soul of Kanakht in an instant.

'Uh-oh.'

A tsunami of essence flooded her crumbling soul, mending it in an instant.

Much more impactful was the great torrent of fragments that flowed into her shattered soul core.

The core, which had been growing steadily for decades, suddenly ballooned, increasing in size at a speed visible to the naked eye.

It had instantly grown so vast and so heavy, in fact, that Jet's Transcendent soul started to struggle with bearing its weight.

'That's… quite a boon. I think.'

Jet felt strange. Much more powerful, yes, but also... dangerously unbalanced.

She would deal with that later, though. For now...

Jet had slaughtered every soul enveloped by the viridian glow with her first strike. Her second strike was aimed at the walls of her prison itself.

It was as if she were cutting a way through the belly of a beast after being swallowed by it.

Soon enough, the strange unworld surrounding her shattered, and she found herself under the tempestuous sky of the Eternal City once again.

Standing in front of the Cursed Wanderer.

The sinister wraith seemed greatly diminished now that the source of his power was destroyed. Jet, meanwhile, felt more powerful than ever.

So, she brought her scythe down and erased her enemy from existence.

That was how the dreadful legend of the Cursed Wanderer and his monstrous ship ended.

That was how a new chapter was added to the glorious legend of the Soul Reaper Jet, as well.

Chapter-2707: Finish Line

The battle against the Dutchman and his wraith armada was all but over. It ended suddenly and without warning when Jet shattered the Soul of Kanakht from within and cut its master down with her Mist Blade.

At the moment, surrounded by cold mist in her ghostly form, she really did look like the Grim Reaper.

Continuing to pour all of his Will into stitching Nightwalker and his shadow back together, Sunny whistled quietly.

"She really is fine…"

Honestly, it felt great — for once, someone else had pulled off an unexpected and utterly unbelievable, borderline preposterous feat. Sunny was quite happy to be usurped.

'This strange mixture of disbelief and elation… is that how people feel when I'm around?'

Maybe it was.

"What are you mumbling about?"

Sunny was pale and covered in cold sweat because of his ghastly burns and the exertion of bending the world to his Will, while Nightwalker looked the same because his soul was being pierced by a literal needle. His voice sounded a bit strained.

Sunny flashed him a brief smile.

"It's Jet. She killed the Dutchman."

Nightwalker blinked a few times.

"That lovely young lady? She destroyed that fiend?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Yes. To everyone outside the Eternal City, that lovely young lady is the fiend."

She had once been the commanding officer of the Devil, after all.

Sunny sounded nonchalant, but while he wasn't as stunned as Nightwalker, he was also surprised. Jet was strong, yes, but the most powerful enemy she had defeated before was a Great Devil — and even then, Effie and Kai had aided her. So, he had not expected her to go and outright slay the Dutchman.

She had given them an unexpected gift.

There were countless wraiths still left on the battlefield, but now that the Tyrant who commanded them was gone, they became a disorganized mob. The Shadow Legion had already been gaining the upper hand, so now the battle was turning into a slaughter.

The sorcery of the Demon of Repose was failing, and as more holes appeared on the surface of the dome, the ruins below were not repairing themselves anymore. The Crushing had destroyed the Eternal City one final time.

Behind Sunny, the Palace was slowly turning into an enormous sphere of jagged scrap metal.

Beyond the Palace…

'Oh. Damn.'

The entire eastern expanse of the lake was enveloped in white flames and swirling torrents of black dust. Nephis seemed to have unleashed her true Transcendent form, becoming a boundless sea of immolating fire. The maelstrom of flame and dust was revolving furiously, being drawn to the epicenter of the fiery calamity…

Soon, it coalesced into a beautiful, radiant silhouette that hovered alone above the water, illuminating the darkness with her brilliance.

Nephis seemed to have absorbed the Madness of Kanakht into herself.

That was… one way to deal with the seemingly indestructible abomination.

'Just her style.'

She remained motionless for a few moments, then lowered her head slowly and briefly covered her eyes with an unsteady hand.

Then, her eyes ignited with a pristine, furious, merciless white light.

Sunny thought that he heard an echo of an inhuman wail.

"I guess that one is dead, as well. Ah. I suddenly feel lazy."

Sunny was not entirely sure how Nephis had managed to absorb the Madness of Kanakht into her mind and burn it to ashes instead of succumbing to it, but then again, that sounded exactly like something she would do.

If it had been Sunny, he would have probably had to suffer infuriating whispers for a couple of years before finding a way to rid himself of the maddening mind invader.

"What are you talking about now?"

Nightwalker looked at him with curiosity.

Sunny smiled.

"Oh… Nephis killed the Madness of Kanakht."

Nightwalker tilted his head.

"Nephis? That pretty young lady?"

Sunny gave him a smoldering glare.

"Yes. And hey, bastard! Pretty young lady again? Don't you know any other words?!"

Nightwalker smiled sheepishly.

"What? I'm just saying it like it is."

He paused for a moment, then asked with a hint of excitement in his voice:

"What about Naeve? Whom did he kill?"

Sunny stared at him with a dubious expression.

"A bunch of wraiths?"

Nightwalker remained silent for a bit, then looked away and sighed.

"Well. He did his best…"

Sunny frowned and drove Weaver's Needle into his soul.

"Ouch!"

At that moment, Sunny dismissed the Shadow Lantern.

The last of the shadows had just entered the Gate of Shadow, so there was no need to keep it manifested anymore. Sunny had recruited as many as he could, and the rest were already being obliterated by the Shadow Realm — a resulting essence storm was becoming increasingly destructive and furious, accelerating their final demise.

Even Sunny's own avatars were not safe there anymore.

So, raising a hand, he summoned the Shadow Lantern back.

The small stone lantern appeared in his hand as if nothing had happened… as if it had not randomly turned into a black hole and obliterated both the divine sorcery of the Demon of Repose and her entire Palace.

Its gate opened, and three tattered shadows flowed out of it, turning into three battered avatars of Sunny.

"Welcome back, guys. Good job."

Behind them, the messy sphere of metal that had been levitating high above the island suddenly plummeted down and hit the ground with

a deafening thunderclap. It was all that remained of the Palace — a hundred times smaller in diameter, but weighing the same.

The moment the sphere impacted against the ground, the Palace Island quaked, and its surface split open. Shielding his eyes from the cloud of dust and debris that rose into the air, Sunny calmly continued stitching.

Nightwalker, meanwhile, looked north, where a titanic mountain of ghastly flesh was drawing closer to the shore.

The arrival of the Flesh of Kanakht was imminent, and the shadow was attached only halfway.

"So, only this ugly thing is left, then?"

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Yeah. Why worry, though? It's just a Great Titan..."

Chapter-2708: Enemy Titan

Sunny would be a fool not to be wary of a Great Titan… especially one as ominous as the Flesh of Kanakht.

True, he had slain a Cursed Tyrant once — a being who was far more powerful, at least in theory. However, that had happened inside Ariel's Game, where the Puppeteer had been heavily restricted by the rules of the miniature realm. Its greatest power was the beings it controlled, but in the end, the sinister moth had been forced to face Sunny alone in melee combat.

So, now, its shadow helped him control his legion.

The Flesh of Kanakht was not restricted by anything, though, and could unleash its power fully.

Still, while Sunny was worried, he wasn't too worried. Facing the Great Titan alone might have been tough, but at the moment, there were two Supreme Titans set against it — the Lord of Shadows and the Star of Ruin.

Speaking of ruin, Nephis had thoroughly destroyed the Eternal City with the help of the Crushing. Sunny had unraveled the sorcery sustaining it, while she obliterated the city itself. Now, it was slowly being turned to dust by the growing number of hexagonal pillars of water, and only the area around the Palace Island still remained unscathed.

Well… relatively unscathed. The Palace itself was gone, and the entire island had cracked. The Shadow Legion was still cleaning up the remaining wraiths, exacerbating the damage.

'What wondrous destruction.'

The Eternal City had survived thousands of years, but Sunny and

Nephis wrecked it in the span of a day.

Now, all they had to do was destroy the Flesh of Kanakht, as well — or at least stall it long enough for him to make Nightwalker mortal again.

Sunny considered his options carefully while his avatars moved to the northern shore of the island. He abandoned the Puppeteer, as well, judging that the Shadow Legion could finish the job even without his direct participation — so, four of his avatars stepped out of the shadows near Jet.

She was still in her wraith form, looking calmly at the looming Titan.

Letting his avatars fuse into one, Sunny spent a moment enjoying the rush of power and raised an eyebrow.

"Why are you not turning back into a human?"

Her ghostly eyes pierced him with a distant gaze. Jet remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"Oh… somehow, this felt more natural for a moment."

The mist around them flowed, being absorbed into her ethereal form and her scythe. Then, she turned back into a human and forced out a smile.

"Damn. I look like a corpse."

Her armor was torn, and her face was bloodied. Having endured the duel against the Cursed Wanderer, Jet looked quite battered — although, surprisingly, not as battered as Slayer was.

That was the difference between fighting an enemy that you perfectly countered and one that you did not.

Sunny stared at her for a moment, then said neutrally:

"You are a corpse."

Jet grinned.

"At least I have a corpse, though! You're just a creepy shadow."

Sunny could not help but smile back.

"Excuse me, creepy? I am not just a creepy shadow. I'm also six other shadows."

He fell silent for a few moments, then added earnestly:

"Also... good job killing the Dutchman."

Jet nodded.

"Good job destroying the Palace. You should think about opening a demolition company."

With that, she turned and looked back at the Flesh of Kanakht.

She remained silent for a moment, then asked:

"So, what now? I sort of… gained a lot from slaying that dreadful duo. Essence, a deluge of fragments, and their souls are trapped in the Mist Blade now, as well. However, as much as I hate to admit it, I don't think I am ready to fight another damn part of Kanakht."

Sunny shook his head.

"That's alright. You should head back and help Cassie and Naeve finish off the remnants of the wraith armada. We'll take it from here."

He paused to think for a second, and then added:

"Oh, and since this whole place seems to be falling apart, be ready to board the Chain Breaker and get the hell out of here, Great Titan be damned."

Jet chuckled.

"I guess our expedition is really coming to an end then."

She looked at the scene of devastation around them, then sighed and turned her back to the lake.

"It was fun. But also… let's do something less exciting next time."

Sunny wasn't sure that he could promise something like that in good faith, but still nodded.

"Deal. Actually, I've been thinking about exploring the Underworld…"

But Jet was already rushing away.

"Nope! Not a chance! Take Cassie instead. She hasn't had an astonishing adventure with the Lord of Shadows yet!

With that, she was gone.

However, Sunny was not alone on the fractured shore. At some point during their conversation, Nephis had landed on the stones behind them, her silver hair moving slightly in the wind.

Now, she walked over to stand beside Sunny on the edge of the water, and both of them looked at the approaching Titan.

"Why did she run away? What did you say?"

Sunny coughed.

"I just shared my plans. You know… one last expedition."

She remained silent for a moment.

"I see."

Her voice should have been flat and devoid of emotion, somewhat, but it sounded strangely full of it instead. Sunny studied her carefully, feeling that something about his girlfriend had changed.

"The Madness of Kanakht… I assume it's dead?"

Nephis shrugged slightly.

"It's dying. Having it in my head… was fruitful. I think I took a big step toward mastering the Knowledge of Corruption."

Sunny smiled faintly.

"That's good."

He fell silent, then asked in the same tone:

"So, how are we going to handle this Great Titan?"

Nephis looked up at the immense expanse of the walking, abhorrent mountain of grotesque flesh and said with a hint of hesitation in her voice:

"I go high, you go low?"

Sunny studied her for a moment.

"Was that a comment about my height?"

Nephis finally turned away from the Titan and looked at him silently.

"I love your height."

Sunny coughed again.

"Oh. That's good, then."

As Nephis took a step forward, though, his expression changed subtly.

"Wait! Hey! You didn't say no!"

Chapter-2709: In the Flesh

Neph's skin swelled with a blinding radiance, and two beautiful wings opened behind her. She soared into the crumbling sky of the Eternal City, rising to meet the titanic figure of the abhorrent Great Titan.

It was as if a falling star was shooting from the ground to pierce its colossal head, surrounded by a vast halo of pure light. Light and darkness clashed, and darkness parted to make way; illuminated by the passing of the Star of Ruin, countless raindrops glistened like precious jewels.

At the same time, a tide of shadows swallowed Sunny and surged, transforming into the Shadow Colossus. Jade Mantle encased him in a suit of fearsome black armor. He summoned Serpent, who turned into a tenebrous odachi that spanned no less than two hundred meters.

'Dare I say that my height is of no issue…'

Sunny smiled.

His Shell was truly enormous… but it seemed tiny in front of the grotesque figure of the Flesh of Kanakht, barely reaching its knee. He could make it taller, but the amount of effort needed to maintain such a gargantuan manifestation would grow exponentially, especially considering how intricate a proper Shell needed to be. So while this size was not his limit, it was the optimal choice.

'Let's fight a Titan.'

Sunny took a step forward.

At the same time, he activated the [Weakening Curse] enchantment of the Curse, with four links of his shadowbound Memory working in tandem to rob the Flesh of Kanakht of its strength.

The effect was both potent and instant, making the Great Titan stagger a little as it rose from the lake.

Nephis had almost reached it by then. However, instead of attacking straight away, she circled the titanic abomination, as if aiming to attack it from behind.

Although Titans were enormous, they were also relatively slow… or at least were supposed to be due to their unimaginable size. Nephis, on the contrary, was impossibly swift, so trying to circle the enemy seemed like a good tactic.

However, in reality, the Flesh of Kanakht did not seem to care about where the attack came from. Its misshapen figure resembled a human, but did not behave like a human — as soon as Nephs drew close to the back of its head, countless tendrils of bleeding flesh shot from its shoulders like a slithering forest, threatening to pierce, envelop, and suffocate her.

But that was alright. Delivering a powerful blow was not the main purpose of her maneuver, anyway — the real purpose was simply to get behind the Flesh of Kanakht.

Because now that Nephis was behind it, her blinding radiance cast the Titan's shadow onto the Palace Island.

And there, Sunny reversed the grip on the hilt of his deadly odachi, then plunged it into that shadow to the hilt.

At the same time, the name of Kanakht thundered from the crumbling sky as Nephis called Fire and Destruction upon the Great Titan. Flying back from the forest of red tendrils, she brandished the Blessing and unleashed an enormous plume of flame from its blade. It was as if her sword suddenly extended to be hundreds of meters long, cutting cleanly through the creature's neck.

The Flesh of Kanakht had been weakened. Then, Nephis and Sunny delivered simultaneous blows — Sunny targeted its soul, while Nephis targeted its corporeal vessel.

The Great Titan shuddered.

Its head began to fall, a charred chasm opening across its vast neck.

However, a moment later, countless ropes of flesh shot from the terrible wound, breaching the chasm. They connected the head back to the neck, then tensed, pulling the severed parts back together. A moment later, the ghastly cut disappeared entirely, as if it had never existed at all.

The soul of the ghastly abomination did not seem severely damaged, either — or maybe it had repaired itself in the blink of an eye, just like the body did.

Sunny grimaced.

'This is going to be bad.'

A heartbeat later, the Flesh of Kanakht retaliated.

Moving with surprising speed, it leaned forward and slammed its ghastly fist into the ground, only missing Sunny by a hair's breadth due to his swift reaction. The entire island shuddered, the fractures scarring its surface growing wider.

At the same time, two more gargantuan arms suddenly shot from its back in a torrent of blood, aiming to catch Nephis.

The lake receded, then rushed back in a towering wave.

'That was…'

Sunny was no more than a hundred meters away from the arm of the Great Titan, the enormous fist resting in a small crater — well within the striking distance of his odachi. He was already in the proper stance, as well, so it would take him only a heartbeat to unleash a devastating slash.

'...close.'

However, before Sunny could pat himself on the shoulder for dodging the obliterating blow, the flesh of the gargantuan forearm squirmed, and countless tendrils shot from it toward him.

This time, there was no time to dodge them.

High above, Nephis had become a radiant spirit. A powerful explosion rippled from her shining figure, tearing the two hands closing in on her to shreds.

But instead of being destroyed, new hands grew from the bleeding stumps, reaching toward her again.

At the same time, Sunny was enveloped by the red tendrils. They slithered across his armor, penetrating the seams between its parts. Two pierced the visor of his helmet, burrowing into the eyes of the Shadow Colossus Shell.

The damage they dealt was not really severe…

But something eerie happened then.

The flesh of the Great Titan did not simply stop at damaging the Shell. Instead, it grew, spreading through the Shell like countless tumors. The Shell, built in the image of a human body, became infected, compromised… and then transformed by the invading sickness.

'D—damnation!'

Sunny barely had time to escape his own Shell.

Appearing out of the shadows hundreds of meters away, he threw a stunned look at the towering Shadow Colossus.

If it could be called that, still.

Enveloped and penetrated by the bleeding flesh, it looked no different from the titanic abomination behind it. It had been infected by the Flesh of Kanakht… it had become the Flesh of Kanakht.

The red colossus shuddered, then took a step forward.

Then, another.

Then, it collided with the forearm of the Great Titan and was

absorbed into it, becoming a part of the ghastly creature.

Standing on the shattered ground of the Palace Island, Sunny shivered.

'I can't feel those shadows anymore.'

Only Serpent managed to escape, assuming his Soul Beast form and slithering away.

Sunny's Shell was truly and utterly gone.

Chapter-2710: Growing Threat

Even weakened, the Flesh of Kanakht was fearsome.

It was enormous. Its power was like a natural calamity. Its vitality seemed boundless, and its Will was like a vast ocean, reshaping the world around the Great Titan to excuse its existence.

Worse than that, its grotesque body was infinitely malleable, mutating at a startling speed to answer the demands of combat. That made the hideous abomination utterly unpredictable, and therefore many times more dangerous.

But worst of all was the fact that the Flesh of Kanakht could grow. It infected any living being — or a semblance of a living being — it could reach, then made them a part of itself.

'I can't let it touch me.'

After witnessing the fate of his Shell, Sunny felt quite disturbed. He was not at all confident that his body would be able to resist the Flesh of Kanakht, even if it had been altered by Weaver's lineage.

And since it seemed that even manifested shadows could become hosts to the parasitic Titan — at least if the form they were manifested into resembled living beings — he could not be sure that abandoning human flesh in favor of his natural form would be of any use, either.

'How do I kill something that I cannot touch?'

For now, Sunny chose to continue with his original strategy and attack the shadow of the Great Titan instead of targeting its body, aiming to destroy the abomination's soul.

Nephis and Sunny clashed with the Flesh of Kanakht, causing the

entire world to ripple and quake. The fury of the forces they unleashed was so terrifying that the Palace Island began crumbling into the water, while the water itself boiled and seethed in a turbulent chaos of towering waves.

The echoes of their dreadful battle washed over the wraiths and the shadows, forcing many to halt. They even reached the Ivory Island, making its chains rattle and the trees growing on its heavenly surface sway.

Nephis unleashed torrents of incinerating flame and rays of annihilating light, burning and severing the body of the Great Titan. Sunny continued to pursue its shadow, delivering one strike after another. They worked together naturally and seamlessly, without the need to use any words…

Not that it did them any good. Cohesion and cooperation were vital in battle, but when the enemy could mutate in any kind of way at any given moment, there were no vulnerabilities left for them to help each other exploit.

No matter the timing of their attacks or the direction, the Flesh of Kanakht could always respond to them with chilling effectiveness. And even if they did manage to deliver it grievous wounds, those wounds were simply mended without leaving any trace behind.

The Great Titan itself, meanwhile, was overwhelmingly powerful, and every one of its dreadful attacks threatened to destroy them.

Well… maybe not. Sunny had seven incarnations, after all, so he would lose a few parts of himself at best if one of the attacks landed. Nephis, meanwhile, could heal herself endlessly. Neither of them even knew if it was possible to kill her, let alone if the Flesh of Kanakht could.

But despite their tenacity, they were at a disadvantage in this battle. Because, unlike the Great Titan, they had something to protect.

They needed to protect the Ivory Island, as well as their companions — Jet, Cassie, and Naeve. Most of all, Sunny needed to keep the Flesh of Kanakht away from his last incarnation and Nightwalker, since the

process of reuniting his shadow with him could not be interrupted.

So, they pushed the Great Titan back into the lake and continued the fight in the shallows.

It was then that Nephis finally failed to evade an attack.

The tendrils growing from the gargantuan body of the Flesh of Kanakht caught her as she was preparing to unleash a conflagration of soul flame. She was a spirit made of light, at the moment — a being made entirely from flame, which made it so there was no flesh for the Titan to infect.

However, the tide of red flesh enveloped her, still.

And then, something truly disturbing happened.

There was no body for the Flesh of Kanakht to infect and control… so, it created a body.

The tendrils of flesh enveloping Nephis slowly assumed a twisted, deformed semblance of her own figure around the radiant spirit… imprisoning her within a cage of bleeding flesh.

It was not a mere physical barrier, either.

When the Flesh of Kanakht grew a body for Nephis, that revolting shell actually became her body. And since she possessed a body now, the Titan could infect her.

Another terrifying explosion shook the world, and Nephis escaped the body that was forced upon her mind and soul in a whirlwind of flame.

She seemed a bit disturbed, though.

[Nothing is working.]

Cassie relayed their messages, allowing them to speak with each other.

[Physical attacks have no effect. It is too big to be turned to ash, and

any burns I leave on its body disappear without a trace.]

[Its soul is unimaginably resilient, as well.]

That was what it felt like to fight a Titan. That being… it seemed endless, inexhaustible. Impossible to destroy.

Sunny was starting to feel a bit of apprehension.

[So what the hell do we do?]

They couldn't even stall for time, really, because the Flesh of Kanakht was too powerful.

Even Death Will was having no effect.

[I…]

Nephis remained silent for a few moments before relaying the rest of her message to Cassie.

[I am not sure. We need to keep attacking it, gather information, and then come up with something that will work.]

If there was something that could work.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'If only…"

And at that moment, a familiar voice suddenly resounded in his ears.

It was a familiar voice — of course, it was. After all, it belonged to Sunny himself.

It was the voice of the Handy Bracelet.

It said:

[Your Shadow has evolved.]

Chapter-2711: Nightmare Fuel

It took Sunny a moment to realize what he had heard.

'My Shadow… what?'

The Flesh of Kanakht went on the offensive just then, surging forward in an avalanche of bleeding tendrils, gargantuan limbs, and titanic power. An obliterating explosion bloomed in its path, sending a devastating shockwave spreading outward in all directions — the waters of the lake seethed, and Sunny leaned into the forceful blow, feeling his bones rattle as he withstood it.

If there were any intact buildings left in the Eternal City, they would have been toppled by the shockwave. Even the Dark Castle shook, a few cracks appearing on its walls.

But the Great Titan was not even slowed. A conflagration of white flames charred its enormous body, turning a vast swath of it into a ghastly blackened mass. Entire slabs of tissue vanished, as if the fire had taken bites out of the gargantuan abomination.

A few moments later, however, the Flesh of Kanakht mended its burned body and continued barreling toward the Palace Island.

Sunny gritted his teeth, manifesting countless chains to hold it back.

The chains snapped.

'Which of my Shadows evolved?!'

That… was a stupid question, really.

There were thousands of subdued immortals sleeping within the Dark Castle, trapped in the labyrinth of nightmares. Those immortals were bizarre beings — their minds and identity were gone, but their bodies

and souls were still intact, endlessly revived by the Eternal City. At the same time, there were parasitic pieces of the Flesh of Kanakht inside their bodies, controlling them.

The Flesh of Kanakht was not the only thing infecting the immortals, though.

They were also infected by the Dream Curse.

Or rather… had been.

The immortals had been caught in the maze of dreams by Nightmare. And every being that died within that maze made the tenebrous steed stronger, their souls serving as fuel in the furnace of his Ascension.

Nightmare had been fighting an uphill battle before because his victims could not die. However, once Sunny opened the Gate of Shadow and made them mortal again, things changed.

The immortals perished, and suddenly, thousands of ancient and exceedingly powerful souls became nourishment for his loyal steed.

And that pushed Nightmare across the threshold of evolving to a new Rank.

…Nightmare was a Supreme Terror now.

Drowned by the shadow of the Flesh of Kanakht, Sunny smiled wickedly.

'Just in time.'

"Nightmare!"

Answering his call, a vast and dreadful presence revealed itself in the shadows. A chilling wind blew across the devastated island, and the scattered wraiths shivered, suddenly overcome by fear.

Then, two terrifying crimson flames ignited in the darkness, and the shadows slowly formed into the shape of a black, monstrous steed. The radiance of the dying flames reflected from the adamantine surface of Nightmare's steel horns and fangs, his hooves turning the

stone rubble to dust.

With his mane dancing in the wind, Nightmare galloped across the fractured ground, bringing terror and dread with him. Reaching Sunny, he stopped and cast a chilling gaze at him, cold fury burning in his ominous crimson eyes.

Sunny could not help but smile.

"Good job, buddy!"

Then, he pointed at the gargantuan form of the Flesh of Kanakht.

"Go put that thing to sleep!"

Nightmare stared at him for a few moments, then turned to look at the Great Titan and neighed. The sound of the monstrous stallion's voice echoed above the boiling lake like a harrowing lullaby, and he rushed forward in a torrent of harrowing darkness.

Sunny looked at the colossal abomination, too.

Suddenly, it did not seem so enormous anymore.

Well, of course it didn't. The notion of a Great Titan was daunting and calamitous…

However, when two Supreme Titans and a Supreme Terror opposed it, it lost some of its dreadful implication.

'Let's go.'

Not wishing to let his steed outpace him, Sunny lunged forward.

The Flesh of Kanakht was vast. Its body, its soul, its Will were like boundless oceans, seemingly endless and inexhaustible. So, even if Nightmare was Supreme now, it was going to take some time to lull the titanic abomination into slumber.

But not as much time as it would have taken normally.

After all, the Great Titan was weakened by four fully augmented links

of the Curse. All its resistances were compromised by a sinister poison, and it was made vulnerable to the insidious infection of the Dream Curse.

The Titan was going to fall asleep much faster than it was supposed to. And even before that, it would slowly grow drowsy, compounding the advantage Sunny and Nephis had.

Somewhere behind them, Slayer and Jet fought side by side, eradicating the frenzied wraiths. Saint and Fiend led the Shadow Legion to do the same. Naeve followed the shadow of Daeron, observing how the ancient Sovereign fought with focused intensity.

The Dark Castle trembled slightly.

'This little…'

It seemed that the Marvelous Mimic was sneakily devouring the bodies of the perished immortals while its master was looking away.

Sunny was a bit concerned, but he decided to deal with the gluttonous Shadow later.

For now, he had a Great Titan to fight.

Emerging from the cloud of immolating flames like a bleeding mountain, the Flesh of Kanakht finally stepped onto the soil of the Palace Island. Its red mass instantly seemed to take root in it, countless tendrils shooting from its feet and shins into the ground.

Then, the flesh began to spread, slowly devouring the island.

The Blessing flashed, severing one of the Great Titan's knees. Another explosion detonated within the cut, obliterating the entire joint.

It repaired itself, of course… but not before the Flesh of Kanakht lost balance and fell to its knees, supporting its inconceivable weight with both forearms.

Sunny was not celebrating, though.

Because both forearms of the Great Titan took root, too, accelerating

the rate with which the red mass of ghastly flesh spread south from the northern shore.

'Damnation.'

Taken aback a little, he watched as the Palace Island was being slowly consumed by an ocean of bleeding flesh. The ghastly mass continued to grow and spread without ever slowing down or showing any sign of stopping.

At the source of it, the Flesh of Kanakht had lost all resemblance to a human, looking more like an abominable four-legged beast.

Sunny grimaced, nonplused.

'Well, that's… just great…'

Chapter-2712: Three Titans

The Flesh of Kanakht was like a force of nature, unstoppable and seemingly inevitable. Its ghastly body was like a mountain… a ferocious mountain that was full of frenzied malevolence and hunger, overcome by an insatiable greed to assimilate all living beings into its hideous expanse.

At the same time, it mended and restored itself no matter what grievous wounds were dealt to it, indifferently shrugging off attacks that would have destroyed entire cities, if not continents.

The colossal vessel of the Great Titan was only half a problem, too. There was also the undulating, revolting mass of red flesh that expanded outward from where it stood on the fractured shore, slowly consuming the Palace Island as it grew.

Sunny hated to admit it, but he was honestly at a loss.

How were they supposed to stop that boundless horror?

He sifted through his Memory, trying to remember if he had ever battled a similar abomination. There had been some that were immense, and there had been some that were like elemental forces. There had even been some that boasted inexhaustible vitality… but Sunny had never faced an enemy quite like this one.

The closest match he could think of was a Nightmare Creature he knew of, but had not witnessed himself — Aletheia of the Nine, the First Seeker.

That fiend had even corrupted everything it touched, just like the Flesh of Kanakht infected and assimilated everyone that touched it.

[Nephis, how exactly did you defeat the First Seeker?]

Having failed to keep the Great Titan away from the island, Nephis streaked across the sky and landed gracefully nearby, sliding back on wet stone before coming to a halt just a few meters away from Sunny.

Her voice sounded a little somber when she spoke:

"That thing? Well, I… blew up the city."

She raised the Blessing, preparing to resume her relentless assault on the harrowing Titan.

"That didn't kill her, though. So I blew up the city some more. And after that, I burned all that remained."

She had already unleashed the fury of her flames upon the Flesh of Kanakht, and it did not help — even though the power she wielded now was incomparably greater than it had been in the Tomb of Ariel.

Still, the answer was typical.

'No, really…'

How did a woman whose go-to strategy was "if you can blow something up, why bother coming up with anything else?" become the ruler of humanity?

Oh right. It was because Sunny, Cassie, and Nephis had schemed and plotted for years to put her on the throne. And also because blowing things up was an effective strategy in a surprising number of situations.

But, sadly, not this situation.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"That doesn't seem to be working, though."

Nephis looked at the towering figure of the Flesh of Kanakht calmly, then nodded.

"And that is not our only problem, either."

She looked past the Great Titan.

Out there, the Eternal City was slowly coming undone. The invisible dome that had protected it for thousands of years was unraveling, and the black depths of the Stormsea were rushing into the breaches, eager to reclaim their prize. The edges of the vast ruin had already been crushed and consumed by water, which stood like a dark wall in the distance.

Closer to the Palace Island, hexagonal pillars stood here and there, with new ones appearing every few moments. Some of the islands were completely destroyed, some had been fractured or pierced.

The Wharf had been obliterated. The Lighthouse… still stood, somehow, even if it had been submerged in water. Just then, another pillar descended from the broken dome, annihilating the Clocktower — this time, forever.

The final devastation was slowly converging on the heart of the Eternal City, which meant that they did not have a lot of time left — even if the Flesh of Kanakht did not swallow them soon.

Nephis spared Sunny a brief look.

"How much longer do you need?"

Her tone was even, but he could tell that she was eager to reclaim Nightwalker for the benefit of humanity, too. After all, the fate of humanity was not only her direct, but also personal responsibility.

Sunny grimaced.

"A bit longer."

Nephis lingered for a split second, then nodded.

"Then we hold that thing back for as long as we must."

With that, she ignited her soul, burning through it to unleash a blinding white inferno.

The Names escaped from her lips, shaping the world according to her

Will.

This time, it was Sunny who manifested a pair of black wings and soared into the air.

The sky was crumbling upon the ruins of the Eternal City, and in its heart, a hideous red infection was spreading like a vast tumor. It felt like the world was coming to an end.

'Let's make it a happy end, then.'

A towering wall of white flames rose across the northern reaches of the Palace Island, cutting off the advance of the spreading mass of flesh. The avalanche of bleeding tissue fell into the fire and burned, turning to ash — then grew again and burned again, disappearing into the immolating crucible.

The fractured ground turned incandescent and then melted, becoming a sea of lava. It flowed into the lake, producing billowing clouds of searing steam.

High above, Sunny opened the Gate of Shadow once again and summoned the ancient darkness of the Realm of Death into his hand. He manifested it into a long javelin, making it as heavy as he could… heavy enough that even his Supreme strength was barely enough to hold it.

Then, he raised his hand and threw the javelin down with all his might.

No tricks, no clever enchantments.

Just inconceivable weight and pure kinetic force.

The black javelin fell like a dark meteor and pierced the shoulder of the Great Titan, impacting it with so much force that the gargantuan abomination staggered and was pushed to the ground. Its shoulder joint exploded, erased from existence, and one of its limbs was separated from the great mass of slithering flesh.

The entire island quaked, a vast swath of it sliding into the boiling lake.

Countless tendrils of flesh shot from the torn limb, reconnecting it to the main body. But before it was fully attached, Sunny had already summoned another javelin.

'I just need to buy us time.'

The battle raged as more and more of the Eternal City disappeared under the water.

Chapter-2713: Elemental Forces

In the end, the Flesh of Kanakht never reached the Dark Castle.

It grew and spread until the entire northern part of the Palace Island became consumed by the virulent mass of red flesh. Sunny could easily imagine that harrowing red sea expanding endlessly… swallowing entire cities, kingdoms, and realms, metastasizing until the entire world and all the living creatures inhabiting it became nothing but one endless, horrid expanse of undulating flesh.

A single, abhorrent organism.

But that was not meant to be, because a towering wall of immolating white flame ignited in the Great Titan's path like a sacred barrier. No matter how much the dreadful mass of bleeding flesh grew, no matter how hungrily it reached forward, its tendrils were burned and incinerated, becoming nothing but ash.

It was a primal, elemental conflict between two Titans of an equal Rank.

Nephis stood motionlessly behind the wall of fire, looking forward with a dispassionate expression on her beautiful face. Her calm grey eyes were cold and firm, shining with the pure white radiance of incandescent flame... and the scathing, horrid agony of being burned alive.

Behind the emotionless mask, however, a storm of furious passions fueled her fire.

The sea of red flesh could not pass the wall of white flames… but the flames could not spread and consume the red sea, either. The two titanic forces were at a stalemate.

Meanwhile, the main vessel of the Great Titan — a hideous, bestial

colossus of bleeding flesh — was struggling to advance deeper inland. Its attempts were thwarted by Sunny, who unleashed a hail of devastating javelins from the dark expanse of the crumbling sky, all aimed at the joints and tendons of the abominable creature.

Each javelin struck like a meteor, causing the boiling waters of the vast lake to overflow its banks and making the sprawling ruins of the Eternal City quake violently.

His aim was true, striking the Flesh of Kanakht in the precise points that, if damaged, would slow the Titan down the most. In retaliation, the gargantuan abomination unleashed a vile forest of towering tendrils to pursue Sunny across the sky, forcing him to play a deadly game of cat and mouse across the collapsing firmament.

The battle of three Titans was truly terrifying, unfolding like a world-ending calamity in the heart of the dying city.

'No, actually… isn't it the battle of four Titans? Serpent participated, too.'

And of course, there was Nightmare as well.

The battle had gone badly for Sunny and Nephis at first. They had barely managed to hold ground, gritting their teeth and refusing to be pushed back. He was even forced to consider the worst-case scenario — abandoning Nightwalker and retreating to save themselves.

But then, slowly…

The Dream Curse started to take hold.

It was difficult to notice at first, the effects barely noticeable. But as Sunny and Nephis stubbornly continued to resist the Flesh of Kanakht, they felt their enemy slowly growing unfocused. The speed with which the red flesh spread diminished a little, and the movements of the titanic abomination grew slightly sluggish.

And as they stood their ground some more, the difference slowly became more pronounced… until it was easily noticeable.

The Flesh of Kanakht was weakened by the Curse, which allowed the Dream Curse to take root in its consciousness faster… which, in turn, made it weaker still.

Contained by Neph's flame and undermined by an insidious synergy of Sunny's powers, the Great Titan fell into a vicious cycle.

And once it did, there was no escape.

The gargantuan abomination, which had been slowly advancing south, became completely immobilized by the devastating rain of black javelins. The sea of red flesh, which had been straining to drown out the wall of white flames with its ghastly mass, began to recede.

The northern part of the island had been completely destroyed by then — the ground was shattered and pulverized, then melted into lava and swallowed by the lake. Billowing clouds of boiling steam and swirling ash were washed away by the ice-cold rain, and deafening thunderclaps echoed above the ruins as enormous waterfalls crushed the Eternal City into dust in the distance.

The Shadow Legion had wiped out most of the remnant wraiths by then, allowing its champions to join the fight against the Flesh of Kanakht.

Saint arrived first, reshaping her tenebrous blade into a greatbow made of pure darkness. Fiend rose from the shadows and gleefully dove into the towering wall of white flames — his steel body turned incandescent, and he unleashed his own infernal flames upon the receding sea of undulating flesh.

Slayer ignored her grievous wounds to draw the string of her bow against the faltering Great Titan. Naeve used the last of his essence to pierce the limbs of the titanic fiend with towering spikes of azure ice… and lastly, Jet faced one more abomination born from the scattered fragments of Kanakht, shredding its flesh with a storm of enchanted shurikens.

Their combined assault slowed the Great Titan down, then halted its advance completely. The red sea of flesh was pushed back and

incinerated, receding until it disappeared altogether.

Only the colossal, hideous mountain of flesh that was the abomination's main vessel remained.

Nephis, Sunny, and their companions continued to deal it an unimaginable amount of damage. The power of Sovereigns, Saints, and Supreme Shadows descended upon it like an annihilating guillotine, tearing the gargantuan body of the Flesh of Kanakht apart over and over again.

It was truly an assault worthy of destroying a Great Titan.

Sunny even caught himself feeling quietly awed by their terrifying show of force.

And yet, and yet…

'How is this even possible?'

The Flesh of Kanakht refused to die.

It refused to be irrevocably wounded, even. Its body and soul continued to repair themselves, enduring an unfathomable amount of punishment with no visible effect.

No matter how terribly the Great Titan was mangled and mutilated, soon enough, it was entirely unscathed again. It stayed alive.

...And it was still alive by the time the Dream Curse pulled him into the embrace of deep, unnatural slumber.

That was how the Eternal City was conquered.

What was left of it, at least.

Chapter-2714: Fury of the Sea

"This is a first."

Standing on the ruins of the Palace Island, Nephis gazed at the gargantuan, motionless figure of the Flesh of Kanakht. She had released her Transcended form, becoming human again — her eyes were dim and tired, the white flames that had burned in them long extinguished. However, the fire dancing on the rubble still reflected in their beautiful grey depths, so there was little difference from how they had shone before.

The Great Titan… was asleep.

It lay on the bed of ash and molten lava, lulled into deep slumber. Sunny and Nephis stood some distance away, surrounded by their companions. They had poured everything they had into destroying the titanic abomination, but it was all for naught.

Finally, after utterly exhausting themselves, they stopped.

Nephis turned and looked at Sunny.

"I have never met an abomination whom I could defeat, but not kill."

Sunny stared at the slumbering Titan with a strange expression.

"Yeah... indeed."

His mind was still reeling in the aftermath of the calamitous confrontation. The siege of the Eternal City, the mad rush to the Palace Island, the stand against the Dutchman and its wraith armada, and finally the battle against the Flesh of Kanakht… all of it had happened so recently and so swiftly, in quick succession.

So, he was failing to fully acknowledge both what had happened and

that it was all but over.

"I don't think I've ever been in this situation, either."

It was preposterous, really. Usually, a battle ended when the enemy was dead — killing the enemy was synonymous with achieving victory. One could win a bloodless victory, of course, but defeating a Nightmare Creature and still failing to kill it was a bizarre novelty.

Sunny regarded the Flesh of Kanakht silently.

The thing was still alive.

It had been captured by the Dream Curse, but even now that Nightmare was a Supreme Terror, the maze of dreadful dreams was not going to hold a Great Titan indefinitely… or even for long.

The ghastly abomination was going to shake off its slumber eventually.

"So what do we do with it now?"

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then looked into the distance.

The distance… was not that far anymore.

The barrier surrounding the Eternal City was failing. In fact, the rate of its destruction had been increasing exponentially — by now, a dozen hexagons composing the invisible dome blinked out of existence every moment, unleashing roaring waterfalls of dark water.

The outer ring of the ruin had already been swallowed by water, so now, it seemed as if a black wall was closing in on the Palace Island from all sides, erasing the world as it drew closer and closer. The inner ring was half-gone, too, and there were even several hexagonal pillars falling into the turbulent lake.

Nephis let out a quiet sigh.

"Do we need to do anything?"

She remained silent for a moment.

"The terrible weight of the Stormsea will soon descend upon the sleeping Titan. Even if the abomination survives the pressure, it will most likely be immobilized. And even if it retains the ability to move despite carrying the entire Stormsea on its shoulders, it might not ever find human Citadels scattered in the waters far east of here. If it does, decades would have passed — the sea is vast, after all. Decades later, we will either be strong enough to vanquish it once and for all… or dead."

Sunny looked at her incredulously.

"So are you suggesting we just… leave it?"

He looked at the grotesque, towering mass of the Flesh of Kanakht. Nephis, Jet, and Naeve looked at it too — which meant that Cassie was watching, as well.

Nobody said anything for a while.

Eventually, it was Nightmare who broke the silence, letting out a quiet snort and glaring at the mountain of bleeding flesh with smoldering hatred.

Nephis and Sunny did not react, and Jet remained her usual self, too. However, Naeve and Fiend could not help but shiver at the sound of the dreadful destrier's voice… considering that Fiend was dozens of meters tall, that was quite the sight.

Sunny shook his head.

"I guess that is…"

His voice was drowned out by the furious roar of rushing water.

High above them, several vast swaths of the dome vanished at the same time, and countless tons of foaming water plummeted down from great height. The world quaked when the water reached the ruins, obliterating the islands closest to the lake and erasing the southern end of the Palace Island from existence.

This time, the damage was not limited to those islands alone. The very foundation of the Eternal City seemed to have reached its limit,

fracturing with a deafening noise.

Several of the remaining islands crumbled and collapsed into the seething canals, revealing where the enormous fractures were hidden. Those fractures spread outward from the point of failure… and most of them converged on the Palace Island.

The Palace Island crumbled, as well.

'Crap!'

Suddenly, Sunny realized that the Flesh of Kanakht was not the real problem. The Great Titan… had been defeated, so even if they failed to slay it, that was all in the past. The current peril facing them was the Eternal City itself — having broken it, they now had to survive its destruction.

The decision on how to deal with the Flesh of Kanakht had been made for them.

"It's time to escape!"

As the ground opened beneath their feet, Nephis summoned her wings again. Sunny grabbed Jet and Naeve, pulling them through the shadows.

A moment later, they appeared on the walls of the Dark Castle. It was leaning heavily to the side, perched precariously on the edge of a deep chasm. Far below, the dark expanse of the deep fracture was swiftly filling up with foaming water — ignoring it, Sunny pushed his companions toward the graceful silhouette of the Chain Breaker.

He forced out a smile, then grinned earnestly.

"My fellow treasure hunters… I hereby announce the completion of the Eternal City expedition! It was a resounding success. Thank you for joining me on this fun and mildly amusing adventure. You both performed admirably! Now, we just need to escape this sunken hell alive..."

Naeve gave him a startled look.

"Wha…"

Before he could finish, Sunny pointed at Cassie, who was already landing on the deck of the Chain Breaker.

"Follow her! I'll join you as soon as I can… if I can… in any case, go!"

Sparing one glance back and making sure that Nephis was already ascending to the Ivory Island, Sunny pushed them one more time and stepped into the shadows again.

As soon as he left them, his gaze landed on his charred incarnation, which was still stitching the wayward shadow of Nightwalker back to its master amid the devastation.

"You fool! What's taking you so long?!"

His figure separated into four identical avatars, each glaring at the fifth with the same indignation.

"Why are you so slow, bastard?!"

"We have defeated an entire wraith armada and a Great Titan while you were dawdling around! What the hell?!"

"Do you see all this water? We hate water!"

As more of the dome collapsed, unleashing an apocalyptic deluge, Sunny gritted his teeth and looked at his other incarnations with seething fury.

"Shut the hell up, wretches!"

He paused for a moment, and then growled:

"Since you're already here, pick up a needle and help out!"

Chapter-2715: In Stitches

Sunny had already done most of the work, but he was tired. His Will was exhausted. As it turned out, undoing a severing performed by the Demon of Repose was far more difficult than breaking the void chamber.

Perhaps it was because this time, it was the ancient daemon who had destroyed the bond between a living being and their shadow, while Sunny was responsible for recreating it.

Breaking things was always easier than making them.

'Damn it…'

Mustering his strength, Sunny forced the world to submit, reshaping it according to his will… one stitch at a time.

His other four incarnations joined, hastening the process. The needles they manifested from shadows were no different from Supreme implements, and yet they were far inferior to the Weaver's Needle — a tool that had been created by Nether and bathed in Weaver's blood, imbued with no enchantments but possessing mystical power.

So, things were still going slower than Sunny would have preferred.

The Eternal City was in its death throes all around them.

Nightwalker studied the five identical avatars of Sunny for a bit, then looked around.

"Crazy bastard. You really did it… you destroyed the Eternal City."

The wall of dark water was already encroaching upon the lake. The southern expanse of the Palace Island had been erased from existence, and more and more of the dome was blinking out of

existence. The deafening roar of plummeting water and the thunderous impacts of descending pillars made the world quake.

Sunny spared him a brief glance and smiled.

"Of course I did. I said I would, after all. And I am the most honest person in the world… seven most honest people in two worlds, actually. Haven't I told you?"

Nightwalker let out a forced chuckle, grimacing from pain.

Then, he looked up.

"That flying ship is leaving."

Sunny nodded.

"Good. I told them to leave."

There was a loud, rumbling noise behind them. The foundation of the island continued to crumble, and the impossible heavy sphere of jagged metal fell down into one of the chasms. Sunny watched it roll with regret, then cursed quietly and sent one of his incarnations after it.

Soon enough, it ended up in his Soul Sea — granted, transporting it there almost drained his nearly boundless reserves of essence. He could get his essence back, though… missing out on this strange trophy, meanwhile, would have gnawed at him forever.

Nightwalker showed no signs of anxiety as he watched the Chain Breaker fly away. In fact, his youthful face returned to its usual distant expression. He even stopped pretending to be bothered by the pain — after decades spent fighting and dying in the Eternal City, there was probably no kind of pain that could impress him.

"The flying island is moving."

Sunny threw a swift glance at the Ivory Island, then concentrated on his work again.

"Good. They're not wasting any time."

Nightwalker remained silent for a few moments, studying him with a dark and detached kind of amusement.

Eventually, he asked with a hint of curiosity in his calm voice:

"Why are you trying so hard?"

Sunny halted for a brief moment, then continued to stitch.

"Haven't I told you? It's because I am desperate."

His voice was hoarse and somber.

"You might not know it because you've been stuck here for decades, but the world is coming undone. The Dream Realm is in the process of consuming Earth, and the fallen deities of that cursed world are stirring. Cursed Nightmare Creatures, Unholy Nightmare Creatures… and countless abominations of lesser Rank, as well. All of them are going to wash over the human enclaves like a tide before too long."

Sunny made another stitch.

"So even if we manage to resettle humanity before the world ends, it will still end up being wiped out sooner rather than later… unless it gives birth to new gods. Which means that some of us will have to challenge the Fifth Nightmare. The Sixth Nightmare, as well. Which means the strongest champions of humanity will either die inside the Seeds or be gone for a long time. Including me."

'Oh.'

Sunny almost froze.

'So that's how it is? I... see.'

While saying those words, he suddenly realized something.

It was the fact that he had not hesitated to include himself among those who would challenge the Nightmares.

He had been struggling with the decision to return to the cruel embrace of the Nightmare Spell for the longest time…

But somewhere along the way — maybe in the frigid expanse of Ariel's Game, maybe on the grimy streets of Mirage City, or maybe even here, in the sunken hell of Repose — he seemed to have already made that decision without even realizing it.

Sunny had already decided to reclaim his fate… to be bound by fate once again.

Only, this time, nobody was putting him in chains. Instead, he was making a choice to accept them — which, perhaps, made all the difference.

He was choosing duty over freedom, trust over independence, responsibility over self-interest.

He did not want to be forgotten anymore. He did not want to be an orphaned shadow anymore.

It was a terrible thing, after all, for a shadow to walk around with nothing to cast it.

'Well. Something like that…'

Sunny smiled bitterly, remained silent for a few moments, and then looked at the dome above them.

"The world is not that different from the Eternal City… it's falling apart."

He pointed to one of the remaining hexagons.

"That's me."

His finger moved slightly.

"That's Nephis. Cassie. Jet. Effie. Kai… Morgan, Seishan and her sisters, the House of Night, Saint Tyris and Saint Roan, Wake of Ruin… and many more. But not that many, in the end."

Sunny looked at Nightwalker solemnly.

"So if I can get one more hexagon, and a stellar one at that, you can

be damn sure that I'll get it. Now shut up and let me work!"

The hexagon he had pointed to vanished just then, unleashing another pillar of water that landed on the Palace Island and making its shores crumble. A few more disappeared, as well, and the wall of dark water swallowed the outer reaches of the lake.

Nightwalker coughed.

"Alright… I think I get it. But aren't we cutting it a little bit too close?"

Sunny grinned.

"What seems to be the problem? You can fold space, and I can outright walk between shadows. Oh, I can also fly. I am sure we'll make it.

Just then, the radiant rift of the Dream Gate split the dark sky in front of the Ivory Island.

And at the same moment, Sunny made the last stitch.

Sunny lowered his hands slowly and saw the shadow of Nightwalker remaining in place, flawlessly attached to his figure.

Looking at the former immortal, Sunny smiled.

"Look! I've granted you death, Nightwalker. So… now would be a great time to run..."

Chapter-2716: Grand Escape

The Eternal City, which had been vast and sprawling, had shrunk to a narrow swath of the lake and the shattered remains of the Palace Island. The Palace itself was gone, and the Eternal City was not eternal anymore. Neither name fit now.

The ornate buildings, the vast groves of silver trees, and the splendid plazas had been turned to rubble by the Crushing, then turned to dust and washed away by the furious descent of the Stormsea. Only the unblemished surface of dark glass remained, stretching into infinity…

And the radiant Lighthouse that still shone brilliantly despite being submerged in water.

Sunny doubted that anyone would ever reach it again. But then again, the future was unpredictable.

The remains of the dome were collapsing.

There were mere minutes left before it vanished completely… seconds, maybe.

So, he had to hurry.

As soon as the last stitch was made, the five incarnations of Sunny fused into one. He had already dismissed his Shadows. The colossal figure of the Puppeteer was gone from its perch atop the Dark Castle, and the Dark Castle itself was gone as well.

The Shadow Legion had retreated back into the vast lightless expanse of his soul.

All that remained was to get to the Ivory Island before it dove into the Dream Gate.

Looking up, Sunny took a single step and emerged from the shadows of the Tower of Hope.

At the same time, Nightwalker took a single step across folded space and appeared on the emerald grass beside him.

The legendary founder of the House of Night looked around with a detached expression and asked in an even tone:

"What is this place, exactly?"

Sunny glanced at the skull of the dead dragon that stared at them with empty eye sockets.

"Ivory Tower. This one was built by a different daemon."

The Chain Breaker was already resting on the placid waters of the small lake. Beyond it, the pristine white abyss of the Dream Gate was drawing closer and closer, slowly obscuring the devastated Eternal City. Towering pillars of dark water surrounded them on all sides, and above them, the last of the invisible dome was crumbling under the unimaginable weight of the Stormsea.

Nightwalker looked ahead, remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a slightly subdued tone:

"So I am really leaving this place, after all."

He let out a long sigh, then smiled faintly.

Looking down, he studied the grotesque form of the Flesh of Kanakht that was slowly drowning in rising water far below.

"And we are really leaving that thing behind without killing it. I can't quite believe it."

Sunny looked down, too. His expression turned a little sour.

"...Yeah. Ah, now there are two Great Titans on my kill list. Don't worry, I'll get to them sooner or later."

He always did.

Sunny turned away, knowing that there was no point in thinking about the Flesh of Kanakht anymore, at the moment. Instead, he started to gather shadows around him, preparing to encase the Ivory Island in a cocoon of them if need be. It was still unclear if they would be able to escape the Eternal City before its dome vanished completely, after all.

In fact, the island swayed just then, pivoting to the side to evade a crushing waterfall of dark water that suddenly appeared in its course.

Nightwalker sighed, then looked at the Chain Breaker.

"I… want to be on a ship now."

He took another step, landing directly onto the deck of the ancient vessel. Sunny followed.

Nephis, Cassie, Jet, and Naeve were gathered there. There was no need to steer the ship, but Nephis was focused on controlling the Ivory Island. The other three were behind her.

When Sunny and Nightwalker appeared, they all let out relieved sighs.

Jet, who was sitting on the deck and leaning against the railing, smiled lazily.

"Oh, you're back. Good… I thought you decided to go for a swim."

Sunny gave her a long look.

"No, thank you."

Naeve turned to Nightwalker and stared at him with subsided intensity, but did not say anything. Likewise, Cassie remained silent.

No one spoke, watching the approaching Dream Gate intently.

The Eternal City was almost entirely gone by then. The hideous mass of the Flesh of Kanakht had disappeared beneath the waves, and the spot where Sunny had been stitching Nightwalker and his shadow together had been crushed by a pillar of water.

More pillars descended all around the Ivory Island every moment, as if straining to prevent it from reaching the towering white rift of the Gate.

Sunny had escaped a great deal of disaster in his life… granted, few were as apocalyptic as this one. Still, he found it hard to believe that they would actually escape the Eternal City.

And yet, in the end…

They did.

The Ivory Island reached the Dream Gate unscathed. Its edge entered the blinding radiance slowly, and a pristine white wall seemed to erase it from existence.

The wall drew closer as the flying island passed through the Gate, and then swallowed Sunny and his companions.

He closed his eyes a few moments before, so he did not see the actual moment of transition.

But he felt it.

The rain that had been pelting them vanished suddenly. A warm wind caressed his face. The dreadful sounds of a dying city were replaced by blissful silence, and the darkness of the abyssal depths was replaced by gentle sunlight.

Sunny opened his eyes slowly.

A blue sky welcomed him.

'We made it.'

The Ivory Island was flying above the southernmost region of the basin of the River of Tears. The river itself was twisting across a vibrant landscape far below, full and vast.

The Night Garden was resting on its flowing waters, its decks brimming with countless people. After spending a long time away from sunlight, they seemed to have all poured out of the cavernous

holds of the living ship,

Many of them were pointing at the sky now, excited by the appearance of the Ivory Tower.

The Dream Gate closed, cutting the connection between this land and the Eternal City.

…Now, the expedition was truly over.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

They were safe.

Nightwalker took a deep breath and looked up, a smile slowly appearing on his face.

"Ah, the sun. I really did not think that I would ever see it again. One last time."

Turning to Sunny, he bowed slightly.

"Thank you. It means more than you can imagine."

Sunny frowned.

"One last time? What are you talking about? You'll see it plenty… maybe even enough times to get sick of it."

Nightwalker lingered for a moment, then shook his head softly.

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way."

Just then, a long cut suddenly appeared on his cheek, swelling with blood.

Sunny stared at him, dumbfounded.

'What? Where did this cut come from?'

Nothing had attacked them.

Nightwalker turned to Naeve, as if intending to say something.

But by the time he did, two more jagged cuts appeared on his body.

"Nightwalker, what the hell is happening?"

"Father!"

He staggered and fell to his knees, letting out a quiet groan.

"No, n—nothing… it's just,,, mortality. It has a way of catching up with you. "

Countless wounds had revealed themselves on his body. Sunny finally flinched, realizing what was happening.

The Eternal City still had its claws in its prisoner. Nightwalker might have reclaimed his shadow, and they might have escaped… but that did not erase the past.

So, every wound he had received over the decades was catching up to him now.

"Arght!"

His bones cracked with a terrible sound, and his flesh was split open.

He was dying. He was going to die a thousand times over, until there was nothing left of him except scattered fragments of bone and a sea of spilled blood.

"Ah… it's been a… pleasure. I always thought… I'd die on the deck of a ship…"

Sunny stood there, frozen.

'No, it can't be. Not after everything I've done!'

…Luckily, Nephis was not frozen at all.

Appearing near Nightwalker, she placed her hands on his shoulders and looked down.

"Do not die on this ship, though."

A soft radiance suffused her skin, and the terrible wounds on Nightwalker's body started to heal.

And new ones appeared to replace them.

His body was mangled, mutilated, and destroyed. His skin was flayed, and his flesh was torn. His limbs were ripped or severed, and his eyes were gouged out.

No matter how used to pain Nightwalker was, he couldn't help but scream.

However, Neph's flames healed him at the same rate as he was being destroyed and shredded by the blades of postponed death.

In the end, Nightwalker's body was entirely torn apart,.

And yet, Nephis flame healed that damage, too.

'Come on, come on…'

Sunny did not notice when he had held his breath.

Who was going to win?

The laws of the world, or Nephis?

Of course…

In the end, Nephis won.

Nightwalker survived.

He escaped the Eternal City, at long last…

And so did the rest of them, with him.

Chapter-2717: Ruin Raider

The River of Tears was so vast that it seemed boundless, flowing across multiple regions of the Dream Realm. In fact, it was an independent region in and of itself, complete with its own collection of bizarre mysteries and a thriving ecosystem… an ecosystem that was eerie and deadly, like everything else in the dreadful expanse of this perilous world, but thriving nonetheless.

The vast river was born from the great waterfall of the Moonriver Plain, the Weeping Goddess, while its estuary was all the way in the south, on the misty shores of the Stormsea. It used to serve as a great waterway connecting the Citadel Cities of the Song Domain, and now that those cities were swiftly expanding, its vital role had only become more important.

Just like the caravans of the warrior-merchants of the East, the stronghold ships of the West were what made the scattered cities in the basin of the River of Tears a civilization. The scarred, huge, heavily armored vessels carried goods, resources, people, and information across the perilous waters…

None was as fearsome and majestic as the colossal ship that was sailing on the River of Tears at the moment, however.

The Night Garden floated with the current, moving south. It was returning to the Stormsea after escaping its dark depths a few days prior. The Ivory Island glided across the sky high above it, as if escorting the Great Citadel home.

Jet was currently in her garden, looking around with a strange expression.

The sacred trees she had planted had grown considerably in just a few days, their branches brimming with golden fruit. Countless flowers bloomed between them like colorful jewels, while the

decorative bushes had become tall and wild.

"...Do I need to hire a gardener?"

Her tone was a little troubled.

At that moment, a black crow fell from the sky and landed on her shoulder.

"Jet! Jet!"

She looked at the bird and raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah? What?"

The crow pecked at her cheek.

"Fruit! Fruit!"

A subtle smile appeared on her lips.

"What about them?"

Just then, a second crow glided down and landed on her other shoulder.

"What do you mean, what about them? Those are sacred fruit, aren't they? This much should be enough to supply you with essence for a while…"

"Argh, damn it! What the hell?!"

Jet flinched and reeled away, knocking the second crow of her shoulder. The crow was sent tumbling through the air, collided against the trunk of a tree, and fell to the ground pathetically.

There, it turned into a young man with pale skin and raven-black hair, sitting on the ground and comfortably leaning against the tree.

Sunny grinned.

"What's up with that reaction?"

Jet stared at him with wide eyes.

"Since when… actually, forget it. Never mind."

She sighed, then reached and plucked one of the golden fruit. Walking over to Sunny, she sat near him and took a juicy bite.

The two of them spent a few moments in comfortable silence, watching the clouds move across the azure sky. Eventually, Jet said:

"People don't appreciate what they have until they lose it. I never really paid any particular attention to the sky, but after spending all that time underwater… gods, what a lovely sight. I never want to explore the depths again."

Sunny smiled.

"Me neither. Still… it wasn't all bad, was it? We gained so much."

Just as expected, the expedition to the Eternal City had turned out to be quite eventful — granted, Sunny had not expected to wage a small war against a horde of immortal abominations. However, the spoils were similarly great.

First and foremost, they managed to initiate the restoration of the Night Garden.

Sunny gave Jet a curious glance.

"By the way. What, exactly, changed about your ship?"

She remained silent for a bit, looking around the overgrown garden.

"We are still figuring it out. But you must have noticed some of it already… local soil was always inexplicably fertile, allowing us to gather multiple harvests a year. But now, that nourishing effect has grown many times more powerful. It is truly remarkable."

Sunny nodded.

The trees around them were noticeably higher than they had been before, and the bushes seemed out of control. The same was

happening across the entire titanic ship — everything was growing, blooming, and bearing fruit much faster than before. The surface decks resembled a jungle, and the Night Garden now really looked worthy of its name.

Jet inhaled deeply.

"Here and there, various species of native plants sprouted out of nowhere. They are a bit weird… a certain algae in the water reservoir, for example, is producing oxygen. And I mean all by itself — it doesn't need the sun or carbon dioxide to do so. Other kinds do other useful things. It is too early to tell, but I think the Night Garden is fully self-sufficient now. It can drift for thousands of years in any kind of environment, and people on board will still be comfortable. Well… I mean, they'll be dead of old age. But they would have lived and died of old age comfortably."

She chuckled.

"The aegis surrounding the ship seems to have grown much more sophisticated, as well — stronger, too. Honestly, we have no idea what exactly changed about it, but the changes seem incredibly profound. It is as if the Night Garden is ready to dive into the Void."

Jet paused for a moment, then added in a distant tone:

"Do you think that that was what the Demon of Repose had built it for? That it is a Void Ship?"

Sunny hesitated for a while.

"I don't know. Maybe it was not, initially. But after wandering the seas and the skies for thousands of years, exploring all of existence, she might have grown curious about what lay beyond. Of course… she probably never got the chance to explore it. The Doom War happened first."

Jet sighed, then nodded.

"Indeed. Well, apart from that, the Night Garden now allows me to open… let's call them portals. Rifts that connect two points in space. However, I can't really use that new Component, because to do that,

we need to figure out a different new function first. It has something to do with navigation, but nobody knows how it works. So, until we learn, I can only open those portals to somewhere within my direct line of vision."

She smiled.

"There are lots of minor changes, as well, like the hull being able to repair itself much faster — and so on. I won't bore you."

Sunny leaned back and looked at the sky.

The Night Garden had become more robust… that alone would have made the expedition worthwhile. But there were other gains, as well.

The arsenal of enchanted weapons Sunny had salvaged in the Hippodrome was going to strengthen the forces of humanity. The artefacts looted across various districts would, as well.

The Marvelous Mimic was producing a steady stream of soul coins after gorging itself on the bodies of fallen immortals.

Sunny had become familiar with using the Puppeteer to control the Shadow Legion, increasing the strength of his dark army by a large margin.

Naeve had returned with the Memory carrying a reservoir of starlight capable of granting people the Lineage of Storm God.

Jet had greatly increased the volume of her soul core and captured two powerful souls into her Mist Blade.

Nightmare had become Supreme.

Nephis had come closer to mastering another branch of her Aspect Legacy

Nightwalker had returned to the embrace of humanity.

And Sunny himself…

Sunny had found the sixth fragment of Weaver's Lineage.

One he had yet to absorb.

Chapter-2718: Garden of Flowers

Sunny had felt the weight of the scroll throughout the last few days, busy and chaotic as they were. A million things demanded his attention after weeks of absence… and yet, he could not help but think about the vessel of Weaver's will that lay on the altar of the Nameless Temple's replica, deep within his soul.

Now that things had settled down a little, he could finally face it.

Sunny remained silent for a long while, then smiled and looked at Jet.

"Well, how was it? Your personal adventure with the Lord of Shadows. Was it all you had hoped for?"

Jet chuckled, her icy blue eyes narrowing a little.

"Oh, it was… unforgettable. Effie and Kai weren't lying."

She fell silent for a moment, then added with a shrug.

"Granted, it was far less educational than I had thought it would be. I do not feel like I've learned something. It feels more like… I passed an exam."

Sunny scratched the tip of his nose.

"Well, I wouldn't know. I don't think I ever took a single exam in my entire life. I wouldn't presume to have what it takes to teach the infamous Soul Reaper Jet a lesson, either."

Jet smiled, then looked away.

"What about you?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Me? What about me?"

She glanced at him and shrugged.

"You said that these excursions were to prepare us for the Fourth Nightmare, but to me, it seemed like you were searching for answers of your own. So, have you found them?"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, then turned away with a quiet chuckle.

"Ah... perceptive as always. As it happens, yes, I somehow stumbled on the answer I had been looking for ever since becoming a Saint. Maybe even longer. Thank you for that, by the way."

Why was it that every time he was in dire need of advice, Jet was right there to share some hard-earned wisdom with him? Sunny really did not know how to thank her… but then again, she wouldn't know or remember what it was that he was thanking her for. So there was no point.

For now.

'Oh.'

Sunny remained motionless for a little while, basking in the realization that he had already started to regard her inability to remember him as a temporary affliction. One that would be cured soon, no less.

The same went for everybody else.

It was as if he finally saw light at the end of the tunnel.

Jet smiled and rose from the ground.

"I am not sure what I did, but I am glad that it helped. We outskirt rats should stick together, right? There's not a lot of us left, after all. And since the outskirts are more or less gone, there will never be more. We're a dying breed."

She looked at him with a deadpan expression, then added:

"Well, in our case, I guess we're a dead breed. But whatever."

With that, she chuckled and headed away.

"Come find me again if you ever need a hand, Lord of Shadows. Raising hell with you… ah, it felt strangely enjoyable! Like that is how things are supposed to be."

Sunny watched her go with a distant expression.

When she was gone, he looked down.

"Right."

Jet always joked about being dead. But at the moment…

She seemed like the most alive person he had ever known.

"How things are supposed to be."

***

Sunny remained in the garden for a while longer, looking at the grass and contemplating silently. The weight of the future was pressing down on his shoulders heavily…

But luckily, his shoulders were quite strong.

"Why do I feel so anxious?"

Everything was happening on schedule, but somehow, he felt like they were running out of time. It was an ominous sensation.

In the end, he sighed and outstretched a hand.

A few moments later, an ancient silk scroll appeared on it, emanating a subdued, but terrifying sense of unrestrained power. Despite having been hidden in the heart of a star for thousands of years, it was completely intact, with not a single burn marring its smooth surface.

The spider silk was woven so finely that touching it with his mortal

hand felt like sacrilege.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then sighed and slowly unfurled the scroll.

Inside, an elegant weave of runes was painted with black ink, and at the bottom, a beautiful blue snowdrop decorated the corner, embroidered with such skill that it seemed entirely real.

Sunny trembled, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe.

Somehow, he knew that both the runes and the flower were left on the fine silk by Weaver's own hand.

Calming his widely beating heart, he inhaled deeply and concentrated on the runes.

He did not know what to expect, but... whatever message Weaver had left, it was bound to be important.

Or nebulous and mystifying. He was going to know soon.

...The runes read:

[Weaver was the first one to be born.

And Rime was the first one to die.

Broken and shattered, she succumbed to harrowing wounds and found herself in the embrace of Shadow.

And there, in the darkness, Shadow offered her solace.

"Rest well now, child," whispered the darkness. "Your torment is over. Stay here with me, unhurt and at peace."

But Rime refused.

"Your world is too dark, it is too quiet and hollow. Out there are vast oceans, boundless heavens, and flowers that bloom in the light. I want to swim in the oceans and conquer the heavens… I want to explore all of existence and gather all flowers, to bask in the beauty

and enjoy pleasant scents."

"The flowers are bristling with thorns," pleaded the darkness. "The oceans are cold, and the heavens are empty. Your life was short and brutal — and now, it has come to an end. Stay with me, child. Do not refuse my embrace."

But Rime laughed.

"The thorns are what make flowers beautiful. Cold is what makes warmth desirable. An end paves the way for a new beginning. Even if I can find peace in your arms, Shadow, I want to leave. I want to live, no matter how much it might hurt."

The voice of the darkness grew cold then, turning into a terrible hiss, "But you are mine now, child. You belong to the shadows. I am Death, and no one escapes Death… not even a foolish spirit like you."

It was then that darkness became her chain, and solace became her collar.

Peace became a prison.

Time flowed, and the world slowly changed. Only silence remained the same.

Shadow refused to let Rime go…

So, in the end, she shattered the walls of his realm and escaped into the light.

That was how the Demon of Repose, who had been the first one to die, became the first one to escape Death as well.]

Sunny stared at the runes, drawn into their meaning.

'Rime, the Demon of Repose… so she was the one who had escaped the Shadow Realm…'

As expected of a daemon. The relationship between her and Shadow God was… strangely ambiguous. It was very interesting, too.

All of it was terribly interesting.

However…

'Where the hell is my Lineage?'

Why would Weaver leave behind nothing but a strange fable on the silk scroll?

Frowning, Sunny brushed his hand across the runes.

And there, almost by accident…

He sensed a subtle irregularity.

It was so minor that anyone else would have missed it. But Sunny's fingers had been unnaturally sensitive ever since he assimilated Bone Weave, so he felt the difference in the weave of the silk under a short set of runes.

'Oh?'

Just three words.

Sunny traced them with his fingers.

[...A new beginning.]

And as he did, it was as if a nebulous voice resounded in his ears, making him shudder.

He froze, realizing what this hidden message was.

It was…

It was the will of Weaver, the Demon of Fate, woven into the ancient scroll by their hand.

Once Sunny realized it, the remnant Will of the treacherous daemon surged, reshaping the world to match it.

In the reshaped world, his own Will was different from before.

He had absorbed the Spirit Weave.

'Wow. I didn't even pass out this time.'

Just as Sunny thought that, a wave of indescribable agony washed over him like a tide...

Chapter-2719: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless and His Intrepid Disciples, Abridged (Volume X)

The Shadow Realm had not changed much since Sunny visited last. Granted, that visit had happened quite recently, during the final battle for the Eternal City.

Sunny himself, however, felt a bit different.

The Spirit Weave had augmented his Will, making the world feel much more malleable. It altered the inherent nature of his Will, as well, granting it a second innate affinity — or at least greatly enhancing what had already been there.

Before, the main trait of Sunny's will was Death. Now, however, he also felt a strong connection to Fate. He did not know what to do with that affinity, and honestly, it was quite paradoxical for his Will to possess it — after all, he was a fateless being.

Fateless, masterless… Sunless.

Sunny's whole existence seemed to be built around the absence of things.

Maybe that was why he found the vast, silent, empty expanse of the Shadow Realm so soothing.

Walking across the obsidian dust and enjoying the silver radiance of the distant essence storms, he inhaled the cold air deeply.

"Still… I've done well for myself."

As someone who had been deprived of so many things, Sunny sure managed to achieve a great deal. He was a Supreme Titan, the ruler of the Forgotten Shore, the Lord of the Dark City, the commander of the Shadow Legion… he was also incredibly wealthy, highly accomplished in various fields, and very difficult to kill.

There was someone far more difficult to kill nearby, though.

Reaching the Graveyard of Serpents, Sunny walked over to the spot where the broken figure of Eurys used to rest against the ancient bone. Strangely enough, the talking skeleton was nowhere to be seen — there were, however, traces left in the dust.

Sunny followed them.

He found Eurys a dozen kilometers away, laying listlessly at the bottom of a tall hill. The skeleton seemed to have crawled his way here, tried to climb the hill, and rolled back quite a number of times.

Now, his empty eye sockets were staring at the dark sky expressionlessly.

Clicking his tongue, Sunny sat on the dust nearby.

"Where were you going?"

Eurys remained silent for so long that Sunny started to suspect that he had really managed to die.

However, eventually, the creaky voice resounded from the depths of the cracked skull:

"My, oh my. I assumed you would never come back, boy. So, I took matters into my own hands."

He paused, and then added:

"I had to take them into my hands because my legs are broken. I can't really move my feet."

The skeleton laughed at his own joke, his jaw making loud clacking noises.

Sunny observed him with a faint smile.

"Oh? Right, I remember… you wanted to reach the heart of the Shadow Realm. To die properly before time catches up with you and you turn into a mad beast."

Eurys nodded.

"That's right."

Sunny shook his head.

"I guess it must be a coincidence that the Void Gate is also situated at the heart of the Shadow Realm. You wouldn't know anything about it, would you? And about how it was opened."

Eurys stared at him curiously.

"Oh, it was opened? My, oh my! I did not know."

It was difficult to say if he truly did not know or was simply pretending. Eurys had been nailed to that tree before the very end of the Doom War, after all. So, he would have been hanging on it powerlessly by the time the daemons decided to pull their last gamble.

Nether, Hope, Ariel, Mirage, and Rime…

No, actually, wasn't there one more?

Eurys clicked his jaw.

"Anyway, I wasn't planning to go to the heart of the Shadow Realm to die. It's just what shadows do, so I thought I'd follow the proper etiquette and get the full experience. A semblance of natural death, if you will. I had no idea that someone opened the Void Gate… well, actually, that's a lie. I had an inkling. I don't really care about it, though."

He stared at Sunny with his empty eye sockets.

"Whether it's open or closed, what difference does it make to me?"

The skeleton chuckled.

"Anyway, you seem a little different, boy. I've been crawling up this hill over and over again for a while. What has been happening to you?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Me? My, oh my… so many things have happened. I don't even know where to start."

Eurys gave him an unamused stare.

"Damnation. Start anywhere, then."

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, let's see. First, I went to the Jade Palace and got sucked into a game created by the Demon of Dread. There, I battled Great and Cursed abominations, conquered a bunch of mountains, blew up one or two, and finally had to face my own doubts. In the end, I squished a very talkative moth and escaped."

His eyes glistened dangerously.

"Oh, I also witnessed the end of the world and had a one-sided conversation with the Demon of Fate. They stared right at me and called me an epigone. Ah, it was quite shocking."

Eurys stirred slightly, then said in a neutral voice:

"There is no way. There is no way that Weaver is still alive."

Sunny's smile widened a little.

"Oh, they're not. But when has something like that ever stopped the gods or the daemons from talking?"

He lingered for a moment, then added:

"Anyway, Weaver showed me how the gods died and how the world ended. So… I went and wrote a very comprehensive research paper about it. That took some time. Caused quite a stir, too."

Eurys let out a dubious laugh.

"A… research paper? Oh, you are a philosopher! I knew a few philosophers once. Anyway, that sounds like a lot. No surprise that you have been so busy."

Sunny grinned.

"Oh, that is not all! After winning that game, I went to Mirage Castle and got sucked into a huge mirror. There was an entire city hidden in that mirror, actually, and I had a swell time there. Hunting down serial killers, being screamed at by aged policemen, having therapy sessions with my beautiful Shadow, and riding a metal carriage propelled by countless tiny explosions. Oh, I also discovered chocolate milk and a pastry called a donut. No earth-shattering discoveries this time, though."

Eurys stared at him for a moment.

"Do not? What a strange name for a pastry. By the way, while I do not know what kind of therapy your shadow was administering to you, exactly, I do think that describing your own shadow as beautiful is a bit in poor taste. Humility is the most attractive quality for a young man, you know."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Says who? I think tasteful boasting is far more attractive. And all boasting is tasteful if I'm the one doing the boasting, so… oh, did I tell you that I conquered the southern reaches of Heart God's forest, became the most accomplished enchanter of humanity, seduced the most beautiful woman in the world, and am one of the wealthiest people in existence?"

Eurys remained silent for a long while after that.

'He's probably busy admiring my accomplishments. Well… understandable!'

In the end, the ancient skeleton mumbled quietly:

"I think you did mention being that abominable girl's partner…"

Sunny grinned.

"That's right!"

He studied Eurys for a bit, then shrugged.

"Well, anyway. I helped destroy that Mirror City and escaped. After that, I commandeered the ship of Repose, uncovered a map to ancient treasure, battled all kinds of sea monsters to reach it, defeated an army of immortal Nightmare Creatures to claim it, brought a dead legend back to life… oh, and then destroyed another city. Come to think of it, I've been destroying too many cities as of late, haven't I?"

Eurys gave him a reserved look.

"My, oh my. I'd say. And you've only been gone a few months…"

Sunny shrugged, then smiled.

"Oh, right. I also learned quite a few interesting things about the Nine. Like what Slayer's name was. And where you guys come from."

His smile turned menacing, and a deep darkness drowned his eyes.

"And what you bastards did. Learning something like that would have made me very angry, don't you think... Prince Eurys?"

Eurys stared at him with his empty eye sockets, expressing no particular emotion.

Eventually, he laughed.

"My, oh my! Nobody has called me a prince in ages…"

Chapter-2720: A New Beginning

Sunny stared at the grinning skull, feeling a storm of dark emotions raging in his heart. He had not anticipated feeling this way, but here he was, full of something that he never thought he would feel one day… a sense of righteous indignation.

For someone who had never once thought of himself as righteous or virtuous, that was an unfamiliar state.

But considering the sins of the dead man in front of him, all Sunny's shortcomings seemed like the noblest of virtues.

A smoldering, murderous fury drowned his heart, making his fingers twitch.

'T—this... this wretch. It was all because of him... because of them!'

He really wanted to kill the horrid bastard...

How ironic it was that out of all the people in the world, Eurys was one whom he was powerless to kill.

Sunny forced himself to inhale.

"Auro, Eurys, Orphne, Aletheia, Omer, Aemedon, Aletes… and the other two. There truly has never been a group more vile and wicked than you nine, has there?"

Eurys stared at him for a while, then chuckled.

"Oh. I guess you did learn a bit about us. So… I guess there are still traces of us left out there, in the world."

Sunny could not help but laugh bitterly.

"Traces? This whole damn world is a ghastly monument to your

abhorrent lives. After all, you are the ones who created it. You are the architects of all the horror that I've endured… that everyone has endured. You are the bastards who created the Dream Realm. All those deaths, all that loss — it was all because of you."

Eurys stared at him calmly.

"...Worked like a charm, didn't it?"

As Sunny fell silent in shock, he let out a sigh.

"No, actually, it didn't. We did our best, but… something must have gone wrong at the end."

The ancient skull turned slightly, taking in the desolate landscape of the Shadow Realm.

"None of this was supposed to exist anymore, if we had succeeded. People like you and that young nephilim girl were never supposed to be born, and therefore never supposed to endure any suffering. Ah, but we failed, in the end. Well, I suppose we did destroy the Empire… but not quite in the way we intended."

Sunny listened to his nonchalant tone, feeling his hair stand on end.

How could he be so… matter-of-fact about it? How could he show no regret, no remorse whatsoever?

No glee, no satisfaction either. No pride in having managed to destroy the great gods.

Sunny shook his head slowly.

"You… you must be entirely mad. Aren't you ashamed of what you did? Even a little?"

Eurys just stared at him in bewilderment.

"Ashamed? Why would I be ashamed?"

A short scoff escaped from Sunny's lips.

"Because what you did was monstrous! Because what you did was unconscionable! Because you wiped out countless innocent lives! Women, children, the elderly… those who had nothing to do with your damn realm and the damn Empire. You doomed everyone!"

Eurys remained silent for a while.

Eventually, he said in his creaky voice:

"Wouldn't you?"

Sunny gaped at him, shocked and outraged by the question.

"Of course not!"

The skeleton chuckled.

"That… is a failure of imagination on your part, boy. You are far more heartless and wicked than we have ever been, so I think you'd have done worse. Just imagine. Imagine it honestly."

Eurys stared into his eyes.

"Everyone you cherish, everyone you know, everyone you have ever passed on the street or seen from afar. Your lover, your child, your siblings, your friends, and your comrades. People who depend on you and look up to you… people who despise you, as well. Your teachers, your neighbors, your idols, your priests."

His voice turned darker:

"All slaughtered, mutilated, enslaved, and stolen away to serve the murderers and abusers for what little remains of their lives in vicious indignity. The graves of your parents desecrated, the home you built for yourself burned to the ground. The culture that nurtured you destroyed, and even the language you speak erased. Until everything and everyone you ever knew is gone. Trampled, drowned in malice, and brutalized."

The ancient skeleton laughed quietly.

"And the slavers, those who trampled and brutalized your everything,

continuing their lives unpunished — prospering, even. Smug and satiated in their opulent homes, while those who enabled their barbarity are revered and worshipped everywhere under the sky. Why, would you blame a slave for hating his slaver? Are you sure that you would have been in a forgiving mood, boy?"

Sunny remained silent.

What would he have done if Nephis, Rain, Cassie, Effie and her family, Kai, Jet, Aiko, Teacher Julius, the White Feather clan, the survivors of the First Irregular Company… and everyone else he knew had been brutally killed?

His gaze darkened.

He might have killed a god or two, as well.

Still, he wouldn't have slaughtered innocent bystanders.

He wanted to believe that he wouldn't.

"Pretty… pretty sure."

Eurys laughed.

"Well then, let's hope that you'll never have to find out. As for me, I am at peace with the past."

Sunny looked at him darkly, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"So, what? No remorse? No regret? You don't regret destroying the world at all?"

The skeleton remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"I don't know."

Sunny's eyes widened.

"You… don't know? What kind of answer is that?"

Eyrus stared at him expressionlessly.

"I am quite old, you know? At the beginning… I remember being quite convinced of my mission. My, oh my! I was a man of great conviction. And I even kept that conviction for the first few decades of hanging on that tree. I remember being full of glee while watching the world fall apart from under its branches."

He chuckled.

"But then, eventually, I went mad. And after that, I came to regret my every choice and my every action. I wailed, cried, and begged for forgiveness. I think I cried for a century, and begged for a century more. Then… I don't quite remember. But by the time I came to my senses, I was full of hatred and wicked joy. I celebrated the fact that I destroyed the world. I laughed and sang joyous songs, welcoming every new day in exhilaration. Ah, but eventually… I just stayed silent for an eternity. And by the end of it, I didn't really care either way."

The skeleton clicked his jaw.

"All of it happened so long ago, you know. So I don't know anymore. Sometimes, I feel a little wistful. And sometimes, I feel a little sad. But mostly, I don't feel much of anything at all. Except… ah, I pity you and that abominable girl. You poor kids. You didn't do anything to deserve this."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I don't need your pity."

He couldn't wrap his head around it. Any of it.

The fact that this man had destroyed the world, and the fact that he didn't particularly care about having destroyed the world, as well.

Eurys just stared at him.

"I wasn't offering."

He fell silent for a while, then sighed and said in a neutral tone:

"For what it's worth, I wish you luck. I hope that you do become

gods. And that you build a new world on the ruins of the one I and my people destroyed. The gods I hated are dead, so… I think it will be nice. A new beginning."

His voice sounded sincere enough, but Sunny couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

'A new beginning… is this it, then? Is this Weaver's will?'

He felt like he was about to go mad.

So, he forced himself to calm down. He composed himself and steeled his resolve.

With a sigh, Sunny rose from the ground and summoned Serpent.

"I guess all of this works out great for you, doesn't it, Eurys? Now that I know the truth, I am more motivated than ever to kill you. And if I do become a god, I'll finally have enough power to actually do it. No matter what happens, you win."

Eurys stared at him with the same skeletal, eternal grin.

"I guess it does. My, oh my! I must be a genius."

Sunny exhaled slowly, then nodded.

"Alright, then. After all, I made a promise. I feel like I'll be busy for a while after this, so… I'll try to kill you well today, Asterion."

As he raised his sword, the ancient skeleton laughed.

"Huh? What did you say? Oh, that's strange. That's creepy. Just now, I felt something trying to crawl into my head… how rude. How unpleasant..."

Not listening to his nonsense, Sunny brought the sword down.

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Far away, in a different world, night had enveloped a desolate plain. Ruins of an ancient city towered in the distance like a concrete

jungle, and rusted corpses of grotesque war machines lay half-buried in the dry earth. The air was thick with invisible poison, and no mundane creature could survive this forsaken hell.

Nevertheless, people had intruded upon the desolate plain this night. They were kneeling on the ground, their protective suits and flimsy vehicles covered by dust. Some had already died, but others were still looking up, at the silver disk of the distant moon, chanting a simple prayer.

"Asterion… Asterion… Asterion…"

One more fell to the ground.

"Asterion! Asterion!"

The indifferent moon looked down at them from the sky.

"ASTERION!"

They had been praying for a long time.

But tonight, their prayers were finally answered.

A falling star suddenly streaked across the night sky, burning bright in the vast darkness.

Its fiery halo grew brighter and brighter, falling as it left a trail of smoke in the air.

Finally, a radiant meteor impacted the ground, causing a devastating explosion and a powerful earthquake.

The praying people fell down, crying as they reached toward the crater joyously.

Slowly, their voices grew quiet.

Then, a hand appeared from the crater, and a man wearing a torn, charred spacesuit pulled himself over the edge.

Rising to his feet, he took off his shattered helmet, closed his eyes,

and inhaled the poisonous air with full chest.

This was the first breath he had drawn in decades.

A charming smile twisted his lips.

"Ah… good old Earth. It seems I have returned."

For him, who was born in the Dream Realm, this was an alien world.

But he was still glad to be back.

[End of Part III: Voyage of the Night Garden.]

[End of volume ten: Dark Lord's Dreadful Travelogue.]